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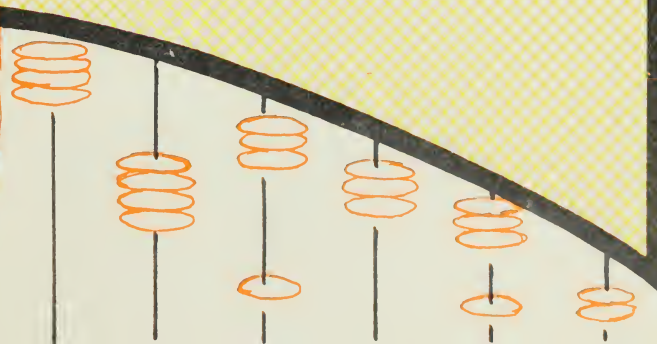
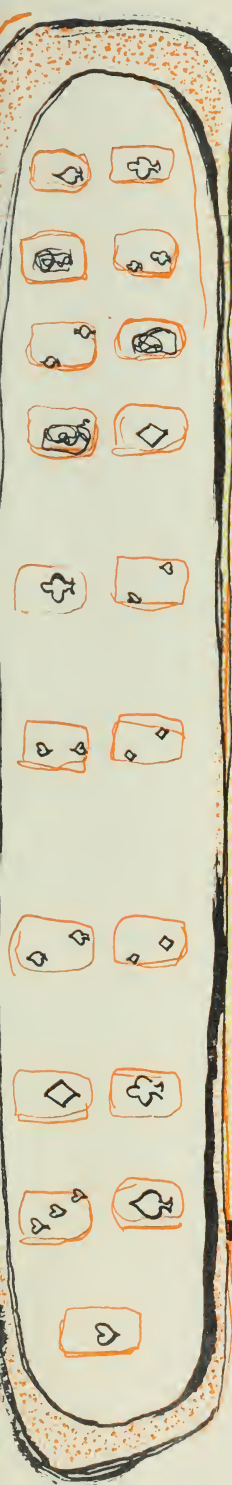


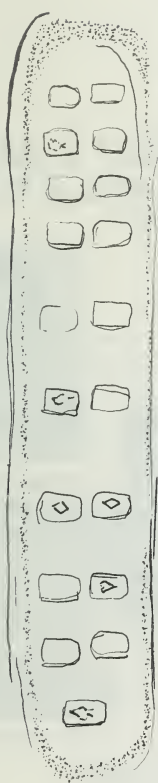
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Gambling

ON THE WESTERN RIVERS

Herbert Asbury

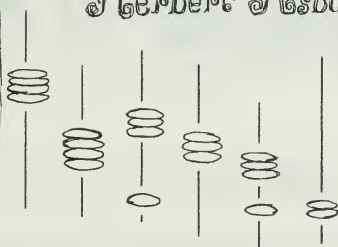




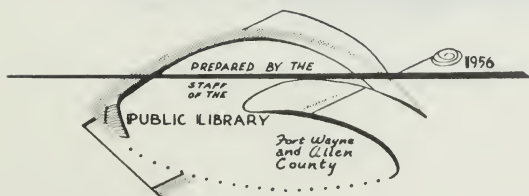
Gambling

ON THE WESTERN RIVERS

Herbert Asbury



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One of a historical series, this pamphlet is published under the direction of the governing Boards of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County.

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Ill. Historical Survey

FOREWORD

Historical novels and motion pictures usually portray the steamboat era preceding the Civil War as a romantic age of chivalry and high adventure. In reality, gambling, crime, vice, and debauchery flourished almost without restraint aboard the steamers and in the towns along the banks of the Mississippi and other western rivers.

The following publication, describing the crooked games, the sharpers, and the lawlessness of ante-bellum days, originally appeared as chapter IX in *SUCKER'S PROGRESS* by Herbert Asbury. The volume was published by Dodd, Mead and Company in 1938. The publisher has graciously granted permission to reprint the chapter.

The Boards and the Staff of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County present this account in the hope that it will prove interesting and informative to Library patrons.

WHILE one wing of the gamblers' migration was leading the tiger up the Atlantic coast and into the sparsely-settled interior, another, recruited principally among the dregs of the New Orleans gambling houses and the sharpers of the underworld, was moving up the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, colonizing the river towns and gradually establishing the professional cheat as one of the major hazards of river travel. The invasion of this field, perhaps the most lucrative that the American gambler has ever enjoyed, began before the turn of the nineteenth century, when a few pioneer sharpers operated in a small way on the occasional flatboat and keelboat that carried passengers in cramped and uncomfortable quarters. It gained in momentum after the Louisiana Purchase had increased transportation facilities and removed the restrictions imposed by the Spaniards upon navigation of the Mississippi, and reached full tide when the steamboat, with its greater speed, superior accommodations, and crowded passenger lists, came into general use.

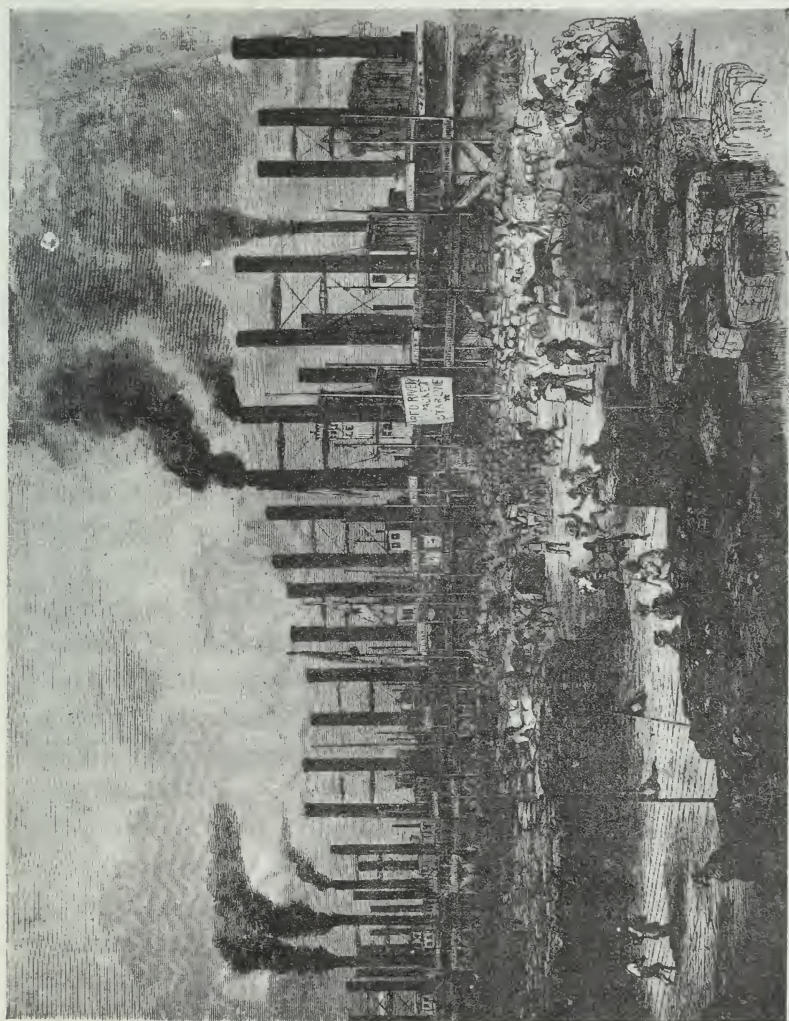
The first of these "swimming volcanoes" appeared on the Ohio and the Mississippi late in 1811, when the *New Orleans*, designed and built by Robert Fulton, was launched at Pittsburg and chugged noisily downstream to the Louisiana metropolis, arriving there early in 1812. The *New Orleans* sank near Baton Rouge within a year, but by the end of 1814 three other steamboats, the *Comet*, the *Vesuvius*, and the *Enterprise*, were in successful operation. The first to ascend the Mississippi above Natchez was the *Enterprise*, commanded by Captain Henry

Miller Shreve, a famous river man of the period and an important figure in the early history of the steamboat.¹ In May, 1815, carrying a cargo of ordnance stores, the *Enterprise* steamed from New Orleans to the Falls of the Ohio at Louisville in twenty-five days, two hours and four minutes, about one-fifth of the time required by the fastest of the keelboats under ideal conditions. Said Thomas Bangs Thorpe in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* for December, 1855:

"The excitement occasioned by this event can not now be imagined. Captain Shreve was greeted by a public demonstration. Triumphal arches were thrown across the streets, and his appearance everywhere called forth bursts of enthusiasm. At the public demonstration given in his honor patriotic speeches were made, and it was formally announced that the *Enterprise* had accomplished all that was possible in inland navigation. Nothing tended to dampen the hilarity of the hour but a suggestion of the gallant captain, 'that, under more favorable circumstances, he could make the same trip in twenty days!' This was deemed an impossibility, and his boast was looked upon as the pardonable weakness of a man already intoxicated by unprecedented success."

The steamboats of this period were primarily freight carriers, and the few adventurers who traveled in them were stowed in rude bunks among the bales and boxes. One of the first to provide decent passenger accommodations was the second *New Orleans*, built by Fulton at Pittsburg in 1815 at a cost of \$65,000. She was 140 feet long by 28 feet wide and, burning four-foot

¹ Shreveport, La., was named in his honor. From 1826 to 1841 he was Superintendent of Western River Improvements, and during that time had charge of the removal of the great Red River Raft, thus opening the river to navigation for a distance of 1,200 miles.



THE NEW ORLEANS LEVEE IN THE LATE 1850'S

logs in a furnace capable of consuming six cords in twenty-four hours, could make four miles an hour upstream and ten miles downstream. She carried two hundred tons of freight and about fifty passengers. The ladies were isolated in a thirty-foot cabin below deck, "it being," as a traveler pointed out, "the most retired place," which no gentleman might enter except by permission of all the ladies. The men had the exclusive use of "an elegant roundhouse" above deck, forty-two feet long and fitted with twenty-six berths in thirteen staterooms. Above the roundhouse was "an elegantly decorated walk with iron railings and nettings," where the lordly males could "sit comfortably and have a commanding view over the boat, river and land, and enjoy the cool breeze," while the ladies sweltered below deck with their knitting and tatting. During the summer months a steamboat of this type was completely covered with bright-colored awning, so that she presented an arresting and eye-filling spectacle as she thundered down the river at the unprecedented speed of ten miles an hour. And after dark, with her glowing furnace, splashing paddle-wheels, clanking machinery, and sparks whirling in every direction, her resemblance to a "swimming volcano" was probably very striking. A German traveler who watched the passing of a steamer from a flatboat at night in 1817 wrote in his journal that it was "a most delightful sight. The dark night and the bright sparks which were flying out of the cylinder rendered to the eye only an instantaneous but a magnificent view. The vessel passed only about fifty feet from us. The water foamed, and one could perceive even the wind caused by the swiftness of the boat."

Two years after Robert Fulton's passenger boat had been put in commission, in March, 1817, Captain Shreve made the trip from New Orleans to Louisville in twenty-five days flat in the *Washington*, built by himself and incorporating several new features of his own invention, among them a cam cut-off which

reduced fuel consumption by three-fifths. The *Washington* was clearly superior to Fulton's boats, and the latter and his associates promptly brought suit in an attempt to drive Captain Shreve from the river, claiming the exclusive right to navigate "all vessels propelled by fire and steam" on the rivers of the Western territories. They seized the *Washington* and other boats belonging to Captain Shreve, but were compelled to relinquish them when the litigation was decided in the Captain's favor. With Fulton's monopoly thus broken, an era of great building activity began, and the log-burners slid from the ways in ever-increasing numbers. By 1820 sixty were churning the muddy waters of the Mississippi with their cumbersome paddle-wheels, and in 1835 this number had been increased to about 250, with an average tonnage of 170. During the great days of steamboating, from about 1845 to 1860, when the whole Western country was booming and the one-time frontier towns of St. Louis, Memphis, Cincinnati and Louisville were being transformed into great cities, at least five hundred first-class vessels were in operation on the Mississippi and the Ohio. And the hulls of scores of others lay rotting on the river beds, for navigation of the Western waters before the Civil War was attended by an appalling loss of life and property. In 1846 a Congressional Committee estimated that the annual loss of boats and cargoes approximated \$2,500,000; and in 1852, one of the few years in which accurate records were kept, seventy-eight steamboats and eighty-four vessels of other types met disaster. In that year alone four hundred persons were killed in river accidents, including one hundred who perished in the explosion of the steamer *Saluda*.

Great improvements in steamboat construction were made in the thirty years that followed the epochal voyages of the first *New Orleans* and the *Enterprise*, and the boats of the 1840's and the 1850's were superior in every respect to the ves-

sels built by Fulton and Captain Shreve. To the ordinary passenger this superiority was manifest principally in increased size—they varied in breadth from thirty-five to fifty feet, and in length from 150 to the 365 feet of the gigantic *Eclipse*; in greater speed—few required more than six days to make the run from New Orleans to Louisville;² and in more luxurious appointments. Enormous sums were expended upon the fittings and furnishings of such famous steamboats as the *Eclipse*, the *Natchez*, the *Sultana*, the *Belle Key*, the *Reindeer*, the *A. L. Shotwell*, and the *Robert E. Lee*, and they richly deserved their world-wide renown as the last word in sybaritic travel. Even English voyagers, those energetic belittlers of all things American, were impressed by the lavish use of gilt and plush, and grudgingly admitted that the “floating palaces” and “palace-steamers,” as they were commonly called, were “grand and imposing,” both outside and inside.

Deck passengers on even the finest steamboats were herded like cattle among the freight, were required on many vessels to furnish their own food and bedding, and were otherwise accorded the treatment which their poverty and lowly estate deserved. But nothing was too good for the cabin passengers, especially those of wealth and position. The pilots, mates and engineers mingled freely with them on terms of equality, and even the Captain sometimes condescended to pass the time of day with a particularly important traveler. As a rule, however, the Captain remained aloof, fully aware of his position and responsibilities, for in those days Federal and state supervision of steamboat navigation was sketchy, to say the least, and the Captain was a veritable autocrat. His will was the law of the boat, and a passenger who violated one of his regulations or failed to show proper deference was apt to find himself ma-

² The record of four days, nine hours and nineteen minutes was made by the *A. L. Shotwell* in 1858.

roomed on the edge of a lonely canebrake, miles from a settlement. But unless a cabin passenger annoyed the Captain, he was permitted to go where he pleased and amuse himself in his own way. "This latitude," wrote an early traveler, "sometimes led to some rather strong contrasts; for instance, there might frequently be seen in the ladies' cabin a group of the godly praying and singing psalms, while in the dining-saloon, from which the tables had been removed, another party was dancing to the music of a fiddle, while farther along, in the social hall, might be heard the loud laughter of jolly carousers around the drinking bar, and occasionally chiming in with the sound of the revelry, the rattling of money and checks, and the sound of voices at the card-tables."

The Social Hall or Main Saloon, with the bar at one end and the floor dotted with brass spittoons, was the principal lounging place of the gentlemen passengers, and there each evening gathered the convivial travelers of every description. "The crowd of passengers ordinarily witnessed on our Mississippi steamers," wrote Thomas Bangs Thorpe, "present more than is anywhere else observable in a small space, the cosmopolitanism of our extraordinary population. Upon their decks are to be seen immigrants from every nationality in Europe; in the cabin are strangely mingled every phase of social life—the aristocratic English lord . . . the ultra-socialist . . . the conservative bishop . . . the graceless gambler . . . the wealthy planter . . . the 'northern fanatic' . . . the farmer from about the arctic regions of Lake Superior . . . the frank, open-handed men of the West . . . a party from 'down East' . . . politicians of every stripe, and religionists of all creeds, for the time drop their wranglings. . . ." ³

These cosmopolites, with their wallets and money-belts choked with gold and their souls overflowing with good humor

³ *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, December, 1855, page 34.

and a yearning for high adventure, were made to order for the professional gambler, and the brethren of the nimble finger and the quick wit came aboard the steamboats in droves to pluck them. At first the sharper's presence was tolerated only so long as no outcry was made against him; if he was accused or even suspected of cheating, the boat was nosed in to shore and he was unceremoniously dumped off. Socially, in the early days at least, he was an outcast, and remained so even in death; when eleven persons were scalded to death by an explosion aboard the *Constitution* on May 4, 1817, a German traveler who saw the accident noted that "among them was a gambler, who was buried separately."⁴ But within a decade after the sad end of this unfortunate wretch the status of the river-going sharper had changed; he had become almost as much a member of a steamboat's personnel as the pilot, and many captains considered it bad luck to leave port without at least one gambler among the passengers. Only occasionally was he interfered with when he set up his game in the Social Hall, and a steamboat's officers, who frequently shared in his takings, paid scant attention to the wails of a stricken sucker. In many instances the gambler silenced a squawking loser with a knife or a pistol and flung the body overboard, and unless the victim was a prominent man or had influential relatives such a crime was seldom reported to the authorities on shore. Said *Niles' Weekly Register* of August 18, 1838:

"Gambling on the western waters. This is a most important as well as a most alarming subject; and we trust the authorities of Illinois and other Western states will enact such laws as shall suppress a demoralizing vice, which, as

⁴ The accident occurred near Bayou Sara, about 175 miles from New Orleans, while the *Constitution* was racing against the *Washington*. Some months earlier, in 1816, the boiler of the *Washington* had exploded near Marietta, O., killing seven men.

will be seen, too often leads to assassination and murder. The Grafton (Ill.) *Backwoodsman*, has an article on the prevalence of gambling on board the steamers in the Western rivers. It records the death of several individuals in an unaccountable manner, and the following extract shows a state of morals almost too depraved for belief!

“Numbers have come to the west, taken passage on board of a boat, and never been heard of again. In repeated instances within the last few years, letters have been addressed to us from a distance, with anxious inquiries for a friend, from whom no tidings had come since he was on the point of embarking on board of a boat. It was feared that he had fallen overboard, or died on the passage, and we were implored in the most affecting terms to seek intelligence of his fate. Our earnest endeavors in most instances have proved unavailing. Could the deep and turbid waters of our rivers reveal their secrets, they would tell but too often the long silence of those absent friends. The midnight gambling, the fierce quarrel, the dirk, the sullen plunge of the ghastly corpse, with heavy weights attached, all follow in quick succession, and with the unerring certainty that effect follows cause.’”

By the early 1830's between 1,000 and 1,500 professional gamblers more or less regularly worked the steamboats between New Orleans and Louisville, with the majority concentrated on the Mississippi below St. Louis, where their favorite prey, the rich planter and slave owner and the foolish young scion of a wealthy family, was found in greatest abundance. The river sharpers of this period were practically one hundred per cent crooked; it is doubtful if any of them ever dealt an honest card or made an honest throw of the dice. They were experts in the use of cold decks, marked cards, strippers, holdouts, re-

flectors, loaded dice, and innumerable other devices for cheating, and played only games which were well adapted to trickery. At short cards they favored Brag, Euchre, Poker, Whist, Boston, All-Fours, and Seven-up or Old Sledge; while the principal banking games were Faro, *Vingt et Un*, and Chuck-a-Luck. Roulette was played infrequently because of the bulky apparatus required. Thimble-Riggers displayed their shenanigans on the steamboats from the earliest days, and Three Card Monte throwers, also called "Broad pitchers" because a playing card was known as a "Broad," began to appear about the time of the war with Mexico. Apparently Craps never became very popular on the rivers except among the Negro deck hands and the lower class of deck passengers; almost no references to it are found in the reminiscences of old-time gamblers or other accounts of life among the suckers.

River gamblers seldom operated alone; usually they traveled in groups of from three to six, adopting various disguises and pretending never to have met until they boarded the steamboat. They capped and roped for one another's banking games, and when one succeeded in enticing a sucker or two into a short card session, the others were always on hand to help make up a table. If a sharper obtained a seat in an honest game of experienced players, where the usual methods of trickery were dangerous, "his confederates would seat themselves in such a position that they could see the cards held by his adversaries, and 'item' the strength of their hands to him by signs." These were made by hand, by twirling the head of a cane in a certain manner, by puffs of cigar smoke, by shifting a quid of tobacco in the cheeks, and in almost every other conceivable fashion.

One of the celebrated "itemers" of the early Mississippi was a lame gambler named James Ashby, who exercised his talents in a field wherein there was comparatively little competition—he preyed almost entirely upon his fellow sharpeners. He usually



...the tunes were signals

worked with a partner who was disguised as a gawky young backwoodsman, en route home after selling a drove of hogs. Ashby impersonated the young man's fiddle-playing old Pappy who didn't have all his buttons, and was forever playing snatches of tunes on his fiddle, especially after the young backwoodsman had been inveigled into a card game. Not for a long time did the gamblers learn that the tunes were signals, or realize that the pseudo-backwoodsman always had a streak of "Nigger-luck" when Pappy started to fiddle. Ashby was eventually exposed in a dive at Natchez-under-the-Hill, and dropped out of sight until the early 1840's, when he appeared in St. Louis and for several years operated the town's principal Faro bank. During this period of his career the lame gambler clad himself in fine raiment of velvet and broadcloth, perhaps to enable him to forget the nondescript garments he had worn while "iteming" on the Mississippi. In addition to the elegant clothing, Ashby decorated his person with a great profusion of diamonds false and real, gold chains, rings and bracelets; and when he went abroad carried a gold-headed cane in each hand and a huge gold pencil, set with diamonds, in his mouth. He died in the early 1850's, and envious gamblers insisted that his death had been "greatly hastened by the enormous weight of jewelry with which he was accustomed to burden himself during his life."

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The river sharpers often went to great trouble and expense in setting the stage of their operations, and usually their elaborate and well-planned schemes were successful. Sometimes, however, the gamblers came to grief at the last moment, either by the quarry becoming suspicious or through interference on the part of chivalrous passengers. One of the busiest of these

knights-errant of the steamboats was no less a personage than the redoubtable James Bowie, inventor of the bowie-knife, once an associate of the pirate Jean Lafitte, and the most noted duelist of his time. This noble-minded killer, who died with Davy Crockett in the defense of the Alamo in 1836, was a menace to the river gamblers for several years; he spent considerable time on the lower Mississippi, and seems to have made a practice of ferreting out crooked gamblers, beating them at their own game, and restoring to suckers the money of which they had been fleeced. But he always required the sucker to swear a solemn oath that he would gamble no more.

Bowie's most celebrated exploit of this character was performed on the steamer *New Orleans* in the fall of 1832, when he saved a young gentleman of Natchez from dishonor and a suicide's grave. In the summer of that year this young gentleman, who fancied himself as a card player and a man of the world, went to New York on his honeymoon, and while there collected about \$50,000 on behalf of various merchants and planters of Natchez. A syndicate of gamblers was formed to despoil him, and one of the sharpers was sent to New York, where he made the young gentleman's acquaintance and learned that the latter intended to go home by way of Pittsburg and Louisville, with a stop-over of several days in Louisville to visit relatives. When the young gentleman took a boat at Pittsburg the sharper was on board, and so were two "Louisiana planters," who made themselves very agreeable. Twenty-card poker was introduced, and the young man from Natchez was permitted to win several hundred dollars. By the time the boat reached Louisville the four men had become such friends that the "planters" and the sharper, who posed as a New Orleans merchant, agreed to wait and go down the river on the *New Orleans*, on which the young gentleman had booked passage for himself and his bride.

The gamblers went after the young gentleman in earnest when the *New Orleans* left the wharf at Louisville. In a few sessions they had cheated him out of \$45,000, and he was betting frantically in a desperate effort to retrieve his losses. Bowie, wearing a black, broad-brimmed slouch hat and black broad-cloth clothing of clerical cut, boarded the boat at Vicksburg and became an interested spectator of the game, which he saw immediately was crooked. After a few more hours' play the young man's last dollar vanished into the capacious pockets of the gamblers, and crazed by remorse he rushed to the rail and attempted to throw himself into the river. He was restrained by Bowie and his wife and taken to his cabin, where Bowie instructed that he be closely watched.

Bowie then went to the bar, casually displayed a bulging wallet, and asked for change for a hundred dollar bill. One of the gamblers, who were opening wine to celebrate the success of their *coup*, obliged, and after a few moments of conversation suggested a card game, to which Bowie agreed. On the first few hands Bowie won, and then the sharpers began to forge ahead. At length one of the "planters" dealt Bowie a hand which any Poker player would bet as long as he could see, and which Bowie recognized as being intended for the big cleanup. The "planters" dropped out after a few bets, but Bowie and the "merchant" continued to raise each other until \$70,000 was piled on the table between them. Finally Bowie saw what he had been watching for—the gambler's hand flicking quickly into his sleeve. Like lightning Bowie seized the sharper's wrist, at the same time drawing from his shirt-bosom a wicked-looking knife.

"Show your hand!" he commanded. "If it contains more than five cards I shall kill you!"

The gambler attempted to break loose, but Bowie twisted his



"Show your hand!" he commanded

wrist and his cards fell to the table—four aces, a queen and a jack.

"I shall take the pot," said Bowie, "with a legitimate Poker hand, four kings and a ten."

"Who the devil are you, anyway?" cried the discomfited gambler.

"I," said the famous duelist, "am James Bowie!"

"The voice was like velvet," says an account of the affair, "but it cut like steel into the hearts of the chief gambler's confederates and deterred them from any purpose or impulse they might have had to interfere. They, with the crowd, shrank back from the table, smitten with terror by the name. Bowie softly swept the banknotes into his large slouch hat and lightly clapped it on his head."

There are two versions of what happened next. One is that Bowie let the gambler go with a lecture, but kept the pot. The other is that the sharper insisted on a duel, and that Bowie borrowed a pistol and shot him off the wheelhouse "just as the great round face of the sun, like a golden cannon ball," appeared over a neighboring cliff. This trifling matter disposed of, Bowie gave the young gentleman of Natchez two-thirds of the contents of the hat, and kept the remainder as spoils of war. With tears in his eyes the young gentleman swore never to touch another card, and both he and his bride prayed that Heaven might bless their benefactor.

Occasionally when no chivalrous bystander was at hand to save him from the consequences of his folly, a desperate sucker would attempt to outsmart the gamblers. But almost always he was so nervous and clumsy that his cheating was soon discovered. And when it was, the indignation of the sharpers knew no bounds, and the punishment inflicted upon the luckless wight for his ungentlemanly conduct was swift and condign. What

happened to one young planter who attempted to trick sharpers was thus told by an old-time river man:

"I was on one of the smaller boats one night on which were some gamblers going down the river to meet a large steamer coming up. I suppose the partners on the big boat had most of their gambling machinery. At any rate, when they saw two or three young plantation men on the boat they could only find one greasy pack of cards and no chips. The boat had a cargo of corn, so one of the party shelled some and it was used as chips.

"About the time this decision was made one of the planters disappeared. He had managed to slip down into the hold where the corn was, and in the dark he took the first ear he found, and, shelling it, put the corn in his pocket. He afterward joined the game, buying some chips, which he placed in another pocket. . . .

"Luck was against him, and he lost his last honest chip. It was his turn to ante. He plunged his hand down into his pocket, got some grains of corn, and slapped them down on the table. When he raised his hand, lo and behold, the grains were red. In an instant every man was on his feet. One held a pistol at his head, while the rest went through his pockets. Of course they brought up a whole lot of red corn. The corn that the dealers had shelled and given out was white. They bound him hand and foot, and were holding a council to determine what to do with him when we heard the whistle of the big steamer.

"They took him on board with them, and I never could learn what they did with him, but I was on the river for many years after that and I never saw him again."⁵

⁵ *Poker Stories*, collected and edited by John F. B. Lillard; New York, 1896; pages 44-45.

When the enterprising gambler was not a-gambling on the Mississippi, when his flagrant cheating made the steamboats temporarily too hot for him, and when there was a dearth of traveling suckers, he was taking his ease or practicing his profession in the underworld districts of the larger river towns—the Swamp at New Orleans, a dozen blocks on Girod Street a half-mile or so from the wharves; Natchez-under-the-Hill, squatting in the miasmal mud flats below the town which early travelers described as, next to Charleston, the most beautiful in America; the Pinch Gut at Memphis, sprawling from the base of Chickasaw Bluff to the yellow waters of the Mississippi, and so called because of the terrible effect produced by the whisky sold there; and the Landing at Vicksburg, a tangle of vice and debauchery which was not included in the plans of the Rev. Newit Vick when he founded a city among the Walnut Hills.

The Swamp was the largest of these areas, but it differed from the others only in size and minor physical details; all were literally and figuratively stink-holes of creation—mazes of narrow streets and alleys teeming with gamblers, murderers, footpads, burglars, arsonists, pickpockets, prostitutes and pimps, and ruffians who would gouge out a man's eye or chew off his nose for the price of a drink. Every flimsy cabin, clap-board shanty, and abandoned flatboat with its bottom stuck in the mud, was a grogery, a brothel, a dance house, a gambling den or a low tavern which combined under one roof the worst features of the other establishments. All of them ran wide open twenty-four hours a day, brawling and debauchery of every description were virtually continuous, and murder was so common as to attract only passing attention; the body of a man stabbed or shot to death was simply rolled into the river and the incident forgotten.

Originally these cesspools of crime and corruption were built



... put the corn in his pocket

up principally to cater to the savage lusts of the flatboatmen, as a class probably the roughest, toughest and most quarrelsome of all the pioneers who penetrated the Western wilderness in the vanguard of civilization. When they came ashore they demanded women and whisky, and the river towns provided both in great abundance. And what time the flatboatmen were not guzzling the fiery liquor or enjoying the delights of the flesh, they were brawling and fighting—engaging in single combats which usually resulted in the mutilation of one or both antagonists; or embarking upon mass forays under the leadership of such celebrated river heroes as Bill Sedley, who was king of the flatboatmen until he killed two gamblers in New Orleans and fled from the river to escape the vengeance of their friends; Aleck Masters, a five-foot Kentuckian with prodigious strength and the disposition of a panther; Bill McCoy, who once paddled a home-made canoe 1,300 miles to keep his promise to appear in court at Natchez; and Big Jim Girty, nephew of the notorious renegade Simon Girty and a rough-and-tumble fighter of almost superhuman prowess. For several years Girty was regarded as invincible, the reason being, according to river legend, that he was “provided with a solid body casing on both sides, without interstices through which a knife, dirk or bullet could penetrate.” Despite this miraculous protection, however, he was cut to pieces by a gang of gamblers in a saloon and brothel owned by his mistress, Marie Dufour, at Natchez-under-the-Hill. Madame Dufour shot two of Big Jim’s assailants after he went down, and fired a bullet into her own head when she saw that he was dead.

Nowhere on the Mississippi were the police strong enough to discipline the brawling bullies of the flatboats or to interfere with the schemes and amusements of the underworld. Of necessity, the authorities of New Orleans, Natchez, Vicksburg and Memphis, as well as those of the smaller river towns, adopted the

dangerous policy of ignoring these municipal festers and letting their denizens strictly alone unless they invaded the respectable business and residential sections. When this happened, as it frequently did, the decent citizens turned out *en masse* to drive them back to their holes, where they simmered and stewed until the next outbreak. And busily stirring the unholy mess were the gamblers; they financed the saloons, the brothels, and the taverns, had a finger in every unsavory pie cooked up in these dives, and ran gambling joints wherein they impartially fleeced the river men, stray suckers, and one another. For more than thirty years they dominated every underworld district on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers from Pittsburg to New Orleans, and their arrogance and excesses, both afloat and ashore, aroused increasing fear and resentment throughout the valleys of the Western rivers. By the early 1830's the most startling rumors were current everywhere in that vast territory—the gamblers were rioting in New Orleans, stealing children and forcing them into the brothels; they were agents of the Northern abolitionists; they had burned Mobile, pillaged Natchez, driven all but their own kind out of Vicksburg, and massacred the passengers of a dozen steamboats. The ignorant attributed to the power of the gamblers such acts of God as floods, tornadoes, cyclones, and even the great earthquake which had rocked the Mississippi Valley in 1811;⁶ while among the intelligent classes the belief prevailed,

⁶ This was one of the major earthquakes of history, although the loss of life was comparatively small because the country was thinly settled. It changed the topography of a large part of the Mississippi Valley, creating the great swamps of Southeast Missouri, raising new islands in the Mississippi, and forming scores of lakes on either side of the river. One of these, Reelfoot, is twenty miles long and seven miles wide, and so deep that in places it is supposed to be bottomless. The ground around New Madrid, Mo., center of the disturbance, was so tormented that for a time the current of the Mississippi ran backward, carrying several flatboats to destruction upstream. The shocks began on December 16, 1811, and in the New Madrid country continued almost without intermission for more than three months. They were felt as far east as South Carolina, as far north as the mouth of the Ohio, and as far south as the mouth of the St. Francis River, in Arkansas.

and with some reason, that gamblers were involved in every crime that was committed, and that every criminal was a gambler. For as *Niles' Weekly Register* said on August 8, 1835:

“Under this name are classed a host of desperadoes who belong to the newly settled parts of the country, who are not only cheats at games of chance, but robbers, murderers, and felons in all crimes. They have their squads at all the principal points on the western rivers, and carry on crimes of all sorts by system. They have shown themselves too strong for the civil authorities, and have not hesitated to challenge anyone who dared to call them to an account. No one’s life was safe who interfered with them.”

In the summer of 1834 the people of the Mississippi country first became aware of the fantastic scheme concocted by John A. Murrel, most notorious of the bandits and slave-stealers who operated on the Natchez Trace, and a murderer whose killings, in number and sheer ferocity, have never been equaled in America. Murrel’s plans were exposed by Virgil A. Stewart, a young Georgian who had wormed his way into the bandit’s confidence, and had obtained the names of many of the leading conspirators, together with full details of the organization of the Clan of the Mystic Confederacy, with which Murrel proposed to foment a slave uprising and then, during the excitement of the insurrection, burn and pillage New Orleans, Mobile, Memphis, Vicksburg, Natchez and other Southern cities.

Murrel began to organize the Clan in 1832, and within a year had recruited, from among the most vicious elements of the underworld, almost 1,500 men, of whom some 400 were Councilors, or officers, and the remainder Strikers, or common soldiers. In addition to these there were about a hundred members of the Grand Council, the supreme governing body of the Clan, while



From the New York World. Courtesy the Press Publishing Co.

A WICKED GAME ON ONE OF THE OLD MISSISSIPPI STEAMBOATS

in every Southern state agents of the Clan were working among the Negroes, arousing them against their masters and organizing them into companies in preparation for the great day. Murrel told Stewart that on the date set for the rebellion—Christmas Day, 1835—he would have under his command at least 300 Grand Councillors, 600 Councillors, and 5,000 Strikers; and that the entire population of the underworld would rally around his standard once the killing and looting had begun.

Stewart fell in with Murrel in the spring of 1834 while searching for two slaves which had been stolen from a preacher near Jackson, Tenn. He accompanied the bandit chieftain to the headquarters of the Clan, a log house in an Arkansas swamp opposite the town of Randolph, Tenn., and procured the conspirator's arrest when they returned to Tennessee. In July, 1834, Murrel was convicted of stealing slaves and sentenced to ten years in the Penitentiary at Nashville, and whatever chance of success his scheme might have had vanished when he entered the prison gates. On the witness stand, and later in a pamphlet called *The Western Land Pirate*, Stewart described in detail the organization and aims of the Clan, and gave the names of the conspirators which he had obtained from Murrel. Many of them were well-known gamblers, and others were supposedly respectable planters, merchants, and tavern-keepers. There was also, of course, a considerable number of those slimy slugs the politicians, perennial allies of the American criminal.

Stewart's testimony, the additional revelations contained in his pamphlet, and the fact that Murrel's gangsters made several attempts to kill him, caused a tremendous sensation throughout the South, and intensified the feeling of uneasiness with which the activities of the gamblers were regarded. The pamphlet was purchased in large quantities and eagerly read and discussed, and it was everywhere agreed that something should be done to curb the growing power of the underworld and, in particular, of the

gamblers. There was a great deal of talk, and considerable resolution-passing, but actually very little was accomplished. The Tennessee Legislature enacted a law "making the exhibition of the game of Faro punishable by fine and imprisonment,"⁷ and in some of the smaller towns a few gamblers were caught up and used according to "Lynch's Law"⁸—that is, they were given from 40 to 300 lashes, tarred and feathered, and ordered to leave town within twenty-four hours—but in the larger cities the signs of impending trouble were ignored, though visible on every hand.

With Murrel in prison, the Clan of the Mystic Confederacy was looked upon as a snake without a head, and almost a year passed before the people of the Mississippi Valley learned that it was still writhing in the dark places of the underworld. They finally awakened to a full realization of the danger in June, 1835, when two slaves were overheard discussing the insurrection on a plantation in Madison County, Mississippi. The Negroes confessed all they knew of the conspiracy, and an investigation begun by local authorities revealed that the Clan not only

⁷ The gamblers attempted to evade the law by removing the sevens from the deck and calling the game "Forty-eight," but the Tennessee courts held that it was the same game within the meaning of the statute. One gambler was sent to prison for two years.

⁸ This was the form in which the expression was generally used in those days. It didn't become synonymous with hanging until after the Civil War. The New York *Sun* of August 4, 1835, and *Niles' Weekly Register* of August 8, 1835, gave this version of the origin of "Lynch's Law": "In Washington county, Pa., many years ago, there lived a poaching vagabond who, it was believed, maintained himself and his family by pilfering from the farmers around him. . . . At length a Mr. Van Swearingen laid [a] trap for him, in which he was caught. . . . Van Swearingen told him he would give him twenty-four hours to leave the neighborhood, adding that if he remained longer he would prosecute him. The poacher only laughed at his threats, while the latter went to consult his neighbors as to what was to be done . . . five or six of them repaired to the poachers . . . proceeded to try him in due form, choosing one of their number, a farmer named Lynch, to be judge. . . . The case was submitted to the judge, who decided that the poacher should be tied up and receive three hundred lashes, 'well laid on,' and then be given twenty-four hours to leave the place, under penalty of receiving three hundred more if found after that time. . . ."

had not abandoned Murrel's scheme, but had advanced the date of the uprising to July 4, 1835. Unwilling to wait upon the slow and cumbersome processes of the law, the planters of Madison County held a meeting at Livingston and formed a Committee of Safety, of which Colonel H. G. Runnels, elected Governor of Mississippi that same year, was made Chairman. Similar organizations were formed elsewhere in Mississippi and in Tennessee, and under the authority of these Committees bands of Rangers and Regulators swept through both states, arresting all who were suspected of being implicated in the conspiracy.

One of the first brought to Madison County for trial was Joshua Cotton, a Steam Doctor, who was said also to be interested in several gambling houses in Natchez and Vicksburg. Cotton confessed that he was one of Murrel's principal lieutenants and a Grand Councillor of the Clan of the Mystic Confederacy. "Our object in undertaking to excite the Negroes to rebellion," he said, "was not for the purpose of liberating them, but for plunder . . . but from the exposure of our plans in Stewart's pamphlet, we expected the citizens would be on their guard at the time mentioned, that being the 25th of December next; and we determined to take them by surprise and try it on the night of July 4th. . . . There are arms and ammunition deposited in Hinds County, near Raymond." Cotton was hanged as soon as he had signed his confession, and within ten days a dozen other white men and twice as many Negroes, almost all of whom admitted participation in the conspiracy, had likewise been strung up to the nearest trees. Messengers on swift horses carried the news of the executions, and warning of the intended uprising, as rapidly as they could cover the country, and when the fateful day came the slaves had been so cowed by the loss of their white leaders, and the fact that the planters were ready for them, that they caused no trouble anywhere.

But the rank and file of the criminal armies with which the



"Burn the Court House!"

Clan had expected to conquer the cities were not as easily convinced that their cause was hopeless. On the Fourth of July every underworld colony on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers from Cincinnati to New Orleans was in a ferment of disorder; mobs of drunken gamblers, ruffians and prostitutes raged through the narrow streets and alleys, cursing and fighting among themselves. Everywhere they made menacing gestures against the respectable elements of the population, but the captains who were to lead them to victory and loot were for the most part in flight, and only in Memphis and Vicksburg did the demonstrations reach alarming proportions. In Memphis a mob of several hundred men and women swarmed up the Bluff from the Pinch Gut, brandishing knives, clubs and pistols. They milled for an hour in the Public Square, yelling "Burn the Court House!" but lacking courage to apply the torch. All afternoon they roared through the town, looting a few stores and beating an occasional pedestrian, but scrambling away in fright whenever they encountered the groups of armed citizens who patrolled the residential section. At dusk the mob vanished into the Pinch Gut as suddenly as it had appeared, and during the night of brawling and carousing that followed the demonstration it succeeded in doing more damage in its own district than it had done on the Bluff. Half a dozen buildings were burned, among them the Pedraza Hotel, the Pinch Gut's most notorious resort and a veritable nest of gamblers and prostitutes.

Until the abortive revolt engineered by the Clan of the Mystic Confederacy, Vicksburg was the capital of the gamblers' empire. There they not only controlled the colony of ruffians and prostitutes at the Landing, but by the late 1820's had invaded the pleasant city in the hills with crooked gambling games and their concomitant crime and disorder. John O'Connor described Vicksburg as "the liveliest gambling place in the whole Southwest," and said that "gambling banks existed, of various kinds,

both on the hill and under the hill; in log-cabins, board houses, canvas tents and in flatboats. Vicksburg was a great place in those days. . . .”⁹ Jonathan H. Green wrote that he had “no doubt but that as many as three-fourths of all the citizens of Vicksburg were more or less addicted to gambling,” and that “gambling so prevailed in Vicksburg that those citizens who did not encourage the gamblers, were continually exposed to the insults of those desperadoes; and those who did encourage them by playing with them, were constantly exposed to their villainous frauds and cheats. This class of men had become so entirely regardless of all order and decency, that they cared nothing for law, nor had they any respect for any person; and would, for the slightest offense, as soon spit in the face of the most respected citizen as they would kick at a snarling dog.”¹⁰ A letter from Vicksburg published in *Niles’ Weekly Register* on August 1, 1835, further described the situation there:

“For years past, professional gamblers, destitute of all sense of moral obligations—unconnected with society by any of its ordinary ties, and intent only on the gratification of their avarice—have made Vicksburg their place of rendezvous—, and, in the very bosom of our society, boldly plotted their vile and lawless machinations. Here, as everywhere else, the laws of the country were found wholly ineffectual for the punishment of these individuals, and emboldened by impunity, their numbers and their crimes have daily continued to multiply. Every species of transgression followed in their train. They supported a large number of tippling houses, to which they would decoy the youthful and unsuspecting, and, after stripping them of their possessions, send them forth into the world the ready and desperate

⁹ *Wanderings of a Vagabond*, page 248.

¹⁰ *An Exposure of the Arts and Miseries of Gambling*, pages 211–12.

instruments of vice. Our streets everywhere resounded with the echoes of their drunken and obscene mirth, and no citizen was secure from their villainy. Frequently in armed bodies, they have disturbed the good order of public assemblages, insulted our citizens, and defied our civil authorities. Thus had they continued to grow bolder in their wickedness, and more formidable in their numbers. . . .”

On July 4, 1835, the Vicksburg Volunteers, the local military company, celebrated Independence Day with a barbecue and speech-making in a grove in the eastern part of the town. While the oratory was in progress half a dozen well-known gamblers, all of whom had obviously been drinking, appeared on the outskirts of the crowd, where they began talking and laughing in a loud and boisterous manner. One of them, Francis Cabler, a former blacksmith who had acquired a considerable reputation as a pugilist in Natchez before joining the gamblers’ colony at Vicksburg, attempted to make his way to the speakers’ stand, jostling ladies and overturning two or three tables in his blundering progress. An officer of the Volunteers, named Fisher, assisted by several citizens, tried to quiet him, and he “insulted the officer and struck one of the citizens.”¹¹ Cabler was immediately seized by Fisher’s comrades, but Captain Baumgard, commander of the Volunteers, intervened, and the gambler was released upon his promise to leave the grove.

At the close of the day’s festivities the Volunteers, parading through the town before disbanding, were met in the public Square with the information that Cabler was coming up the hill to kill Fisher and anyone else who dared interfere with him. In a few minutes the gambler appeared in the Square, cursing and yelling and flourishing a pistol and a knife, while the hilt of a

¹¹ In the account of the disturbances at Vicksburg and elsewhere on the river this and other quotations not otherwise credited are from various issues of *Niles’ Weekly Register*, July and August, 1835.

dirk peeped from his pocket. He staggered toward the waiting Volunteers, but was disarmed and placed under arrest before he could use his weapons. Then arose the question of what to do with him. "To liberate him, would have been to devote several of the most respectable members of the company to his vengeance, and to proceed against him at law would have been mere mockery, inasmuch, as, not having had the opportunity of consummating his designs, no adequate punishment could have been inflicted on him. Consequently it was determined to take him into the woods and *Lynch* him—which is a mode of punishment provided for such as become obnoxious in a manner which the law cannot reach." Followed by a large number of approving citizens, the Volunteers marched Cabler to the grove where the original trouble had occurred. There the gambler was tied to a tree, given thirty-two lashes with a whip, tarred and feathered, and ordered to leave Vicksburg within forty-eight hours.

The underworld forces of the Clan of the Mystic Confederacy at Vicksburg, larger in numbers and more efficiently organized than elsewhere on the Mississippi, were under the command of James Hoard, keeper of a gambling house and "the Lucifer of the gang," and Henry Wyatt, a Faro dealer and bartender who when he was hanged ten years later had committed seven murders. It is very doubtful if Hoard and Wyatt had anything to do with Cabler's crazy outbreak, but they quickly attempted to take advantage of the fury which the seizure of the gambler had aroused among the denizens of the Landing. They sent word to Captain Baumgard that if Cabler was whipped they would burn Vicksburg, and when the Volunteers ignored the ultimatum and proceeded with the lynching, Hoard and Wyatt summoned their followers and started up the hill to carry out the threat. The column set out from the Landing with much cursing and boasting, but men began to drop out before it had gone a hundred feet, and when Hoard and Wyatt reached the top of the hill not more

than a dozen men straggled after them. So they perforce marched down again.

The sortie had failed to rescue Cabler, but it had implanted in the minds of the people of Vicksburg the conviction that they would not be safe until the colony of gamblers was destroyed. That night a great mass meeting, attended by virtually every respectable adult male in the town, was held at the Court House, and these resolutions were unanimously adopted:

"Resolved, That a notice be given all professional gamblers, that the citizens of Vicksburg are resolved to exclude them from this place and its vicinity; and that twenty-four hours' notice be given them to leave the place.

"Resolved, That all persons permitting Faro dealing in their houses, be also notified that they will be prosecuted therefor.

"Resolved, That one hundred copies of the foregoing resolutions be printed and stuck up at the corners of the streets—and that this publication be deemed notice."

By eight o'clock in the morning of Sunday, July 5th, copies of the notice had been posted at every street corner in Vicksburg. During the day many gamblers, and a large number of prostitutes and other inhabitants of the Landing, "terrified by the threats of the citizens," fled the town in boats, wagons and on horseback. But some of the principal gamblers, convinced that the storm would blow over, elected to remain and await developments, and if necessary defend themselves against attack. Among them were Hoard, Wyatt, Dutch Bill, McCall, Sam Smith; Hullum, the son of the Rev. Duke W. Hullum of Cincinnati; and John North, "one of the most profligate of the gang," who ran a hotel and gambling place which was the rendezvous of ruffians and thieves. Hoard and Wyatt concealed themselves



From an old print

"CANADA BILL" DISGUISED AS A RUSTIC



HENRY WYATT

in Hoard's house, behind drawn blinds and locked doors; and the others garrisoned North's tavern, where they barricaded the doors and windows and laid in a store of arms and ammunition.

The defiant gamblers were not molested on July 5th, although great excitement prevailed throughout Vicksburg. But at 9 A. M. on July 6th the members of the Volunteers, fully armed, assembled in the Public Square under the command of Captain Baumgard. Preceded by a Negro fife and drum corps playing *Yankee Doodle* under the direction of the cashier of the Planters' Bank, the Volunteers "marched to each suspected house, and, sending in an examining committee, dragged out every Faro table and other gambling apparatus that could be found." At length they reached North's tavern, surrounded the building, and with axes smashed the back door. Captain Baumgard called upon the gamblers to surrender, "when four or five shots were fired from the interior, one of which instantly killed Dr. Hugh S. Bodley, a citizen universally beloved and respected." The Volunteers returned the fire, wounding Hullum, and "a crowd of citizens, their indignation overcoming all other feelings," burst open every door of the building. They overwhelmed the gamblers and dragged into the street McCall, Smith, Dutch Bill, and Hullum, who had not been seriously hurt. North escaped, but was caught by a pursuing posse a mile down the river and brought back to Vicksburg. With their hands tied behind them and ropes about their necks, the five gamblers were marched to the barbecue grove, presenting, the *Louisiana Advertiser* of New Orleans said, "such a horrible appearance that the passersby were moved even to tears." But as another account says, "all sympathy for the wretches was completely merged in detestation and horror of their crime," and so they were hanged in the presence of virtually the entire respectable population of Vicksburg.¹²

¹² Governor H. G. Runnels received a letter from the Rev. Mr. Hullum, father of one of the gamblers, on November 21, 1835. He demanded that the lynchers be punished, but the state took no action.

At 11 A. M., after the bodies of the gamblers had been dangling for about an hour, they were cut down, stacked like cord wood in a big box, and dumped into a hole which had been dug near the gallows. Then the Volunteers and the mob of citizens returned to the Public Square, where the gambling apparatus which had been seized was piled up and burned. All of the money found in the gambling houses was spread out upon a table and paid out to citizens who could prove that they had been fleeced by the sharpers. During these ceremonies word was brought to Captain Baumgard that Hoard and Wyatt were still in town and threatening reprisals. A posse was dispatched to search them out, but both men had escaped, Wyatt by boat and Hoard on a horse. Hoard "the next morning crossed the Big Black, at Baldwin's Ferry, in a state of indescribable consternation;" he had been so badly frightened that his hair had turned white. The townspeople of Vicksburg particularly regretted that Hoard had slipped out of their clutches, "as his whole course of life . . . had exhibited the most shameless profligacy, and been a continual series of transgressions against the laws of God and man." Hoard reached New Orleans in safety, and is said to have changed his name, and renounced gambling and conspiracy in favor of less dangerous pursuits.

Jonathan H. Green says that Wyatt was captured by the Volunteers, bound hand and foot, and set adrift on the Mississippi in a canoe; but this is probably untrue, for if he had been caught he certainly would have been hanged. In any event Wyatt made his way to Cincinnati, and lived there and in other Ohio towns for several years, committing two murders and serving a term in the Ohio State Penitentiary. About 1843 he and another gambler named Gordon appeared in upstate New York, and both were convicted of robbery and sent to the State Prison at Auburn. Wyatt made an unsuccessful attempt to escape during the fall of 1844, and on March 16, 1845, believing that Gordon

had given information to the prison guards, he stabbed his comrade to death as the convicts were returning to their cells from chapel. Wyatt was found guilty of murder and hanged, despite the then unique plea of moral insanity advanced by his lawyer, who was no less a personage than William H. Seward, a former Governor of New York, and later United States Senator and Secretary of State in Abraham Lincoln's cabinet.

While the flames from the burning gambling apparatus were still crackling in the Public Square, the leading citizens of Vicksburg held another meeting in the Court House and organized an anti-gambling society, "the members of which have pledged their lives, fortunes and sacred honor for the suppression of gambling and the punishment and expulsion of gamblers." Throughout the night of July 6th the streets of Vicksburg and the narrow by-ways of the Landing were patrolled by armed members of the Society and detachments of Volunteers, while the exodus of the gamblers and their underworld satellites continued by every available means of transportation. By dawn of July 7th every gambler had left the town, and the few prostitutes and ruffians who remained in the Landing huddled silently in their dens. Forty or fifty gamblers had rowed and paddled out to Palmyra Island in skiffs and canoes, and remained there for several days, although there was much talk in Vicksburg of chartering a steamboat to bring them back to the town for punishment. Finally a passing vessel took them off.

On the evening of July 10th several hundred residents of Natchez held a meeting at which a memorial from the citizens of Vicksburg was read, "asking the assistance of the people of Natchez in the suppression of gambling, and their co-operation in the expulsion of professional gamblers from the country." A committee was appointed to organize a "society for the suppression of gambling and other vices," and the meeting unanimously offered to "support with our services and lives such measures as

the civil authorities of Natchez may direct for the suppression of gambling." Officially it was the sense of the meeting that the authorities should handle the situation; unofficially groups of citizens visited Natchez-under-the-Hill and told the gamblers and other undesirable characters that they must leave or be hanged. They left in droves, so salutary had been the warning of the five dead men at Vicksburg. The steamer *Mogul*, upon her arrival at New Orleans on July 13th, reported "that she saw at Natchez, as she passed down, several boats crowded with persons who had been ordered from that place, in consequence of their abandoned character, and also saw, at Ellis' Cliffs, 18 miles below Natchez, one or two flatboats freighted with the same description of person, but principally females—all bound down the Mississippi."

Resolutions deploring "any violent measures against the individual lately expelled from Natchez," and offering to co-operate with the Mayor in "the preservation of the public peace and good order," were adopted at a meeting of a thousand men in New Orleans, but nothing was done about gambling or conditions in the Swamp. Later in the year, however, the law prohibiting gambling anywhere in Louisiana was enacted by the Legislature, and it was well enforced in New Orleans for some ten years. In Mobile, on July 21, 1835, a meeting resolved that "the citizens of Mobile disapprove of gaming, and gamesters, and . . . will render their prompt and cheerful aid and assistance to the city authorities in suppressing gambling in this city, in preventing the introduction among us of gamesters and vagrants of any description, and in expelling them from the city whenever they may be identified." In Lexington, Ky., on Sunday, July 26th, a mass meeting ordered all persons without an honest means of livelihood to leave within twenty-four hours. Fifty men, most of them gamblers, left immediately. On the same day in Covington, Ky., a mob razed a gambling house, "well known as a

rendezvous for infamous characters," a few hours after one gambler had killed another in a dispute over a bet of twelve and one-half cents. A Negro was concerned in the game, and the Cincinnati *Whig* said next day, "So much for gambling on Sunday with a Negro." The same paper on July 23rd published a letter from Madison County, Miss., saying that eighteen gamblers had been captured after killing several of their pursuers, and would be hanged.¹³ At Cincinnati on July 23rd a mob formed to burn the gambling houses and hang the gamblers, but Mayor Samuel W. Davies prevented trouble by closing the saloons, swearing in a special police force of five hundred men, and issuing a proclamation:

" . . . great excitement prevails among the citizens, produced by the presence of a number of persons called gamblers, whose offensive pursuits, it is said, have caused their expulsion from other places . . . it is known to me, that strong and violent measures are contemplated . . . for the purpose of compelling these persons immediately to leave the city . . . the police are fully competent to effect the object in view, and a resort to violence . . . may lead to consequences hereafter greatly to be deprecated."

A score of fugitives from Vicksburg reached the small town of Clinton, in Hinds County, Miss., on the evening of July 8th, but resumed their travels when they found this notice posted on the street corners:

"All gamblers found in Clinton after 12 o'clock, will be used according to Lynch's Law.

CAPT. SLICK.

"N.B. The importations from Vicksburg will look out."

¹³ I can find no record that such a wholesale execution of gamblers occurred.

"Where will the exiled blacklegs turn their steps next?" asked the *Louisville Journal*. "Towards Louisville? We solemnly warn them against it . . . there are unequivocal indications, just at this time, that the gamblers already here cannot make their escape too precipitately."

So it went throughout the South and as far east as Baltimore, where a mob burned a gambling house about a month after the uprising at Vicksburg. Action of one form or another was undertaken against the gamblers everywhere along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers south of Cincinnati; some communities maintained patrols for several months, and every stranger was required to give an account of himself and prove the legitimacy of his visit. The hanging of John North and his fellows had marked the end of the gamblers' supremacy, and the beginning of a widespread Vigilante movement which cleansed the underworld districts of most of the river towns and drove the worst of the sharpers from the steamboats. Many of the exiles found refuge in the Swamp at New Orleans, which had escaped the cleansing process and remained the most vicious underworld area west of the Atlantic seaboard. Others went up the rivers to St. Louis, Cincinnati, Pittsburg, and across country to the thriving little settlement of Chicago; and after a few years some returned to Natchez and other towns on the river and resumed their trade, though not in the brazen manner to which they had been accustomed, and not at all in Vicksburg. According to local historians there was no more public gambling in Vicksburg until the Civil War. Still others fled to New York, Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and other Eastern cities. On August 25, 1835, the *New York Sun* noted that several Vicksburg gamblers were in the metropolis, and remarked that "they are safe enough here, in all conscience;" while the *Philadelphia Enquirer* reported that a sharper recently arrived from the West carried in

his sleeve "a curious kind of butcher knife, the blade of which shoots in and out of the handle by a spring, and is known by the name of 'Bodie's Knife,' or 'The Arkansaw Toothpick.'" ¹⁴

4

Gambling on the Western rivers languished for a year or so after the Vigilante outbreak at Vicksburg and the expulsion of the gamblers from Natchez and other towns, but by the beginning of 1837 the sharpers had begun to leave their hiding places and creep back aboard the steamboats. During the fifteen or twenty years which preceded the Civil War, when river travel was in its heyday, gambling was at least as prevalent as ever on both the Ohio and the Mississippi; no fewer than two thousand professional gamblers were actively and prosperously engaged in trimming the traveling sucker from Louisville to the Gulf of Mexico. More than five hundred operated between Vicksburg and New Orleans alone, for the lower Mississippi remained the sharper's favorite hunting ground and the scene of his greatest triumphs. The period in which this host of tricksters dominated life on the steamboats is celebrated in song and story as the "romantic" age of river gambling, the era of the chivalrous gambler who scorned to take advantage of an adversary, who righted wrongs, who won the beautiful octoroon slave girl from the besotted planter and then gave the dusky maiden her freedom. In the main, the rose-colored accounts of the good old days, of the noble gambler and the cruel planter, are just so much bosh. Cole Martin, a famous river gambler who afterward ran Faro banks in Chicago, St. Louis and St. Paul, said in 1896:

¹⁴ This probably referred to a bowie-knife, but a real bowie-knife has no spring. It has a blade from ten to fifteen inches long, with a single cutting edge, and a straight back throughout most of its length. Near the tip the back curves concavely, while the edge curves convexly. The first of these knives was made by James Bowie from a blacksmith's rasp. Commercially they were first manufactured in Philadelphia.

"It's very pretty to read about, but the real thing was not so nice. The black-eyed, black-mustached hero gambler that you read about was anything but a hero. There was no chivalry in his nature, and he was ready for any dark deed that would profit him. Of course I am speaking of the professional gambler, for everyone gambled; if they had not done so the professional's occupation would have been gone. The chivalrous ones were the young Southern planters, reckless, but not mean, who would play the full limit and get fleeced.

"We read now, too, of beautiful octoroon girls, white as their masters, who were put up as stakes representing so much money, and who have been won and carried off by strange men, away from mother, father, husband or sweetheart. In the whole course of my experience I never saw an octoroon disposed of in this way. These light-colored Negroes, who have been the stakes in stories, are the creation entirely of the writers. The fact is that the octoroon and other light-colored Negroes are a great deal more common today than they were then. But I have seen Negro women disposed of in this fashion, but there was no romance to it. They were generally plantation Negroes, rough and hard, and fit for the severest work, and were sold at the first market where the winners happened to land." ¹⁵

Probably ninety-five per cent of the gamblers who worked the steamboats during the so-called "romantic age" were just as crooked as their brethren of an earlier day—more so, in fact, for new schemes and devices for cheating were constantly being invented, and for all of them the Mississippi was the great proving ground. Except that Poker and Euchre were more common, and Brag, All-Fours and Boston less so, the sharpers who oper-

¹⁵ *Poker Stories*, collected and edited by John F. B. Lillard; pages 42-3.

ated on the "floating palaces" played the same games and used much the same methods which had been so successful before the hanging of the gamblers at Vicksburg. And as an old-time river gambler, Tom Ellison, said in an interview at Vicksburg in 1896, "there's no telling how much money they did pull off the travelers." Ellison continued:

"It was dead easy money, too, all the time. Everyone who traveled had lots of stuff, and everyone was willing to bet, and bet high; so when a fellow did win he won right out of the hole at once. Those Southern planters used to lose money just like fun, and were skinned right and left. Occasionally they caught on and there was a shooting match, but the boys didn't take much chance on being plugged.

"I've seen forty gamblers on one boat, the *John Dickey*. That was in '57, when the officers at Natchez cleaned all the gamblers out of town. The whole gang met the boat at the wharf and started to come aboard, but the Captain wouldn't let them on unless they promised not to play a card aboard. They promised, and he took them on, and the boat came on up the river. You never saw a tired-looking lot of gamblers in your life than them. They hadn't anything to do, and some of them looked as if they'd just as soon jump overboard as not. They kept their promise not to play a card, but how they did skin the passengers on other games.

"Well, sir, those gamblers all got on that boat, and though they didn't touch a card they cleaned out pretty near everybody that had stuff. We landed at a woodpile to take on wood, and the passengers all got out on the bank, and the gamblers all got to betting about running jumps, and of course the passengers dropped in. So they'd run off the gang-plank and up to a tree to jump, when the first gambler would say, 'Hello, what's here?' and stop. Behind the tree

one of the gang had begun throwing Three-Card Monte, while the other got up the jumping scheme. The gamblers won just to make the game good, and the way those fellows skinned the passengers was horrible. The Captain got on to the scheme, and when the boat started off upstream the whole gang—forty of them—were just marooned there in the woods on a cold night. But they took the next boat up or down, and worked their way up this way or down to New Orleans.

“That wasn’t gambling—it was robbing; but that’s what went as gambling in those times. The fellows had to be pretty slick, I can tell you. . . . I’ve seen fellows pick every card in a pack, and call it without missing once. I’ve seen them shuffle them one for one all through from top to bottom, so that they were in the same position after a dozen shuffles that they were in at first. They’d just flutter them up like a flock of quail and get the aces, kings, queens, jacks and tens all together as easy as pie. A sucker had no more chance against those fellows than a snow-ball has in a red-hot oven. They were good fellows, free with their money as water, after scheming to bust their heads to get it. A hundred didn’t bother them any more than a chew of tobacco would you.

“There used to be some big games on every boat. Poker was mostly the game. They played Bluff and Brag a great deal, and the betting was high. I saw a man from Hopkinsville, Ky., lose his whole tobacco crop in one night and get up and never mind it particularly. Many a time I’ve seen a game player just skin off his watch and ring and studs and play them in. Men often lost their goods playing in their way bills. I’ve seen them betting a bale of cotton at a crack, and it wasn’t at all uncommon to hear an old planter betting off his Negroes on a good hand. Every man who ever ran on the river knows that these old planters used to play in their lady

servants, valuing them all the way from \$300 to \$1,500. I saw a little colored boy stand up at \$300 to back his master's faith in a little flush that wasn't any good on earth. The niggers didn't seem to care particularly about it, and it was so common that nobody noticed it particularly. Gambling was commoner then.

"Why, it was nothing but gamble from the time the boat left St. Louis till it reached New Orleans. I've seen a Faro game, three Poker games, and *Monte* running in the cabin, and the deckhands playing at Chuck-a-Luck. Sometimes there'd be a kick and the captain would get hot. When a passenger would squeal the captain would ask him to pick out the man who robbed him, and the gambler, if nabbed, would have to give up the stuff and get off the boat anywhere the captain chose to run her in. The boys used to have false whiskers and wigs for these occasions, so that when the kick was made they couldn't be picked out under their disguises. Many a time I have known them to jump off the boat to get away before the kick was made and the victim could look at the passengers to pick out his man. I've swam ashore myself many a time. There wasn't much prosecuting then if a fellow was caught. The captain was boss, and he made the man give up, put him off the boat, and that settled it. They didn't jug a man right away."¹⁶

A sizable portion of the "stuff" that these slickers of the steamboats squeezed from the pockets of gullible travelers went for fancy clothing, for the river gambler of the 1840's and the 1850's, except of course when he was in disguise, was perhaps the gaudiest and most picturesque dresser of his day; compared to him the New York dude, who flourished about the same time, was a veritable scarecrow. Almost invariably, the sharper of the

¹⁶ *Poker Stories*, pages 50-60.

Mississippi wore a black slouch hat, black broadcloth coat and trousers, black flowing tie, black high-heeled boots, and a white shirt with a low neck and a loose collar, granddaddy of the modern sport shirt. But all this was only the beginning. The white shirt was unbelievably frilled, ruffled and frizzled, and amidst its billowing folds gleamed a diamond, as large as he could afford and popularly known as "the headlight." Framing the shirt was a gaudy vest hand-painted with flowers or scenes of the chase, and further ornamented by rows of pearl, gold, diamond, silver or brass buttons. Gold and diamond rings encircled the smooth fingers which had never been roughened by honest toil, and in a pocket of his vest the gambler carried his watch. Usually this was a Jeurgunsen, which retailed in those days at from \$600 to \$1,000, a massive gold repeater set with gems and with a one-carat diamond in the stem. Attached to the watch and looped several times around his neck was the gambler's crowning glory—the golden chain introduced on the Mississippi by John Cotton of Washington, and without which no sharper's wardrobe was complete. In keeping with this dazzling ensemble was a cultivated appetite which forbade the gambler to drink anything but wine, and a fastidiousness which made him ride across the street in a hack rather than get mud on his glistening boots. "They were fine fellows," said old Tom Ellison, "educated men who could talk to anyone about anything, and as polite as anything you ever saw. What drunks they used to get on after they came in off a trip!"

The great dandies of the river were Jimmy Fitzgerald and Colonel Charles Starr, who obtained his military title by self-appointment. Fitzgerald is said to have been the most richly-dressed gambler on the Mississippi—his boots, gloves and underwear came from Paris, he owned four fine overcoats and a score of expensive suits made by the best tailors in New Orleans, and a dozen hand-painted vests; while diamonds gleamed from

every finger and his gold chain was almost twenty feet long. Three slaves accompanied Fitzgerald on his travels, bearing the cases and boxes containing his garments. He was an expert at all short card games, but he had a weakness for Faro, and the fortune he won on the steamboats was dissipated in the gambling houses ashore. He dropped out of sight a year or so before the Civil War.

Colonel Starr, a man of distinguished appearance with the assurance and pomposity of a matinee idol, was famous among the river gamblers for his ability as a liar as well as for the elegance and extent of his wardrobe. He dearly loved to "talk big"—he had killed a dozen men in duels, rescued maidens in distress, invented appliances for steamboats, and he owned half the land and slaves on either side of the river, to say nothing of huge parcels of real estate in New Orleans and St. Louis. To make his stories more convincing, he would hire Negroes to meet his boat at various landings, posing as messengers from the managers and overseers of his vast estates. Colonel Starr made a great deal of money by his skill at Poker and Seven-up, but like Fitzgerald he was a Faro addict, and squandered huge sums bucking the tiger. During his latter years Colonel Starr abandoned the river and hung around the gambling houses in New Orleans, cadging food and drink from whoever would give him a handout, and panhandling money with which to play Faro. One night a year or so before the Civil War he went into a restaurant where he had once been welcome, and was requested by the manager to pay in advance. Colonel Starr left the place, but returned in an hour with five dollars for which he had pawned his overcoat. He ordered dinner, and when it was served he deliberately turned every dish upside down on the table. Then he walked out, and next morning was found dead in his bed.

Besides Fitzgerald and Colonel Starr, perhaps the best-dressed,



...deliberately turned every dish upside down...

and best-known, sharpers on the Western rivers during the "romantic age" of gambling were these:

Starr Davis, for whom a celebrated race horse was named. A heavy drinker throughout his career on the river, Davis finally fell down a flight of stairs in a St. Louis hotel while on a spree and broke his neck. Tom Ellison described him as "a great old boy."

Big Alexander, one of the few professional gamblers who never played Faro. He was widely known as a high liver, often spending two hundred dollars in one night for wine, yet in four years he sent \$44,000 back to his relatives in Dover, Ky.

Jim McLane, whose wealthy mother gave him an allowance of \$10,000 a year to keep away from her; and his partners Gib Cohern, Tom Mackey and Dock Hill, all of whom sent to Paris for their boots and underwear.

Jim McDonald, a crack shot with a pistol, who used to amuse himself shooting the heels off Negro roustabouts.

Charley Ashlock, who Tom Ellison said "could do more funny work with a deck of cards than I have ever saw before or since."

John Brogan, a great specialist in the use of marked cards at Poker. He was extraordinarily successful until he ran afoul of George Devol and another sharper named Neice, who was an extremely shrewd hand with a reflector. The three men played in a famous old hotel at Alexandria, La., called the Ice House, and within a few hours Devol and Neice had trimmed Brogan for \$4,500 and all of his diamonds. The latter never knew why his marked cards had failed. "Both John Brogan and Neice have been dead many years," wrote Devol in 1886, "and, I trust, are happy in the spirit land—perhaps playing Chuck-a-Luck, marked cards and concave reflectors with St. Peter and the Apostles."

Jim Baisley, who met a dramatic end at the hands of a planter

whose son the gambler had fleeced of almost \$10,000. The planter won back the money the boy had lost, and when Baisley attacked him with a bowie-knife he seized the sharper by the throat and flung him overboard. No effort was made to rescue Baisley and nothing was done to the planter. "It was a fair fight," said an old-timer who described the incident, "and they didn't bother a gentleman for anything like that in those days."

Edward Ryan, a Poker shark and Monte thrower better known as Dad Ryan. He left the river at the beginning of the Civil War, and early in 1865 turned up in Fort Wayne, Ind., as the leader of a gang of pickpockets, Monte artists, Thimble-Riggers and confidence men, and was very powerful in Fort Wayne for several years. There were about thirty members of the gang, and their headquarters were in a saloon and gambling house, complete with trap doors and secret rooms and passages. During the Indiana State Fair in 1865 Ryan's pickpockets stole a bushel of pocketbooks. Ryan was finally sent to prison for two years, and never regained his old-time standing as a gambler. He died in Chicago about 1883.

5

The most brazen tricksters on the Western rivers were the Three-Card Monte throwers, who were especially active during the 1850's. They were all confidence men as well as gamblers, using any sort of swindle that might arouse the cupidity of the sucker and make him an easy victim; and a few were also proficient cheats at Faro, short cards and dice. Monte, however, was always their stand-by, and with this game as their basic fraud they probably took more "stuff" from the steamboat passengers than any other gamblers of their time. Fortunes were made on the river—and promptly lost in the gambling houses ashore—by such celebrated Monte throwers as George Devol, Charley Bush,

Jew Mose, Tom Brown, Holly Chappell, High Miller, Canada Bill Jones; Ephraim Holland, who later achieved considerable prominence as a politician in Cincinnati and ended his career in Hot Springs; Bill Rollins, one of the first Monte men to operate on the Mississippi; Posey Jeffers, who once won \$10,000 in counterfeit money and never lived it down; and Rattlesnake Jack McGee, so called because in his youth he had earned a living catching rattlesnakes in the mountains of West Virginia. Four of these sharpers—Canada Bill, Devol, Brown, and Holly Chappell—traveled together on the Red, Ohio and Mississippi Rivers for some three years in the early 1850's, and when the association was dissolved each man's share of the spoil amounted to \$240,000. But within a year every member of the syndicate had gambled away his fortune and was broke.

Accompanying these sure-thing swindlers, as body servant, was a young Negro boy named Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback, known in those days as Pinch, who afterward became an important figure in the carpet-bag government of Louisiana—he was a member of the State Legislature, Lieutenant Governor, and Governor from December 9, 1872, to January 13, 1873. In 1873 he was elected to the United States Senate, but after three years of debate that body refused to seat him, though allowing him the pay and mileage of a Senator. Devol and Canada Bill taught young Pinchback to throw Monte, play Seven-Up and Poker, and run a Chuck-a-Luck game, and while the white sharpers were trimming the cabin passengers Pinch was ripping the financial hide off the Negro roustabouts and deck hands, from which source came much of the money with which he financed his political adventures after the Civil War. Pinchback's only superior at trimming the deck hands and roustabouts was Sam Johnson, a Negro gambler from Memphis who was a familiar figure on the steamboats for many years. Johnson is said to have been a really remarkable Poker player, but his takings

were small because the black sucker's financial resources were limited. But he neglected no opportunity. Once when he boarded a steamboat to take advantage of a deck hands' pay day, he found that he had been forestalled by a dandified "high yaller" gambler, a stranger to Sam, who had organized a Poker game and was raking in the money at an almost indecent rate. Sam climbed up on a hogshead of sugar and watched the game closely. He soon discovered that the "high yaller" was brazenly palming cards, using "scratch paper," and "laying the bottom stock." Determined to have a share of the winnings, Sam began to sing:

- Gimme some o' dat or I'll break up de game;
Gimme some o' dat or I'll break up de game;
Gimme some o' dat or I'll break up de game,
For Sam Johnson is my name!

Without turning his head or changing countenance, the "high yaller" replied:

- Dar's no use tryin' to break up de game;
Dar's no use tryin' to break up de game;
Dar's no use tryin' to break up de game,
For I'se wid you from now on!

The greatest Monte thrower on the Mississippi was Canada Bill Jones, probably the cleverest operator who ever "pitched a Broad," and one of the few men who could display the Monte tickets and, in the very act of tossing them on a table, palm the queen and ring in a third ace, thus reducing the sucker's chances to minus nothing. And curiously enough, this monarch of the Monte men was the worst-dressed gambler on the river, and looked less like a sharper than the most verdant hayseed that ever stumbled aboard a steamboat. His clothing was always two sizes too large, his boots were scuffed and run down at the heel, and his linen was invariably rumpled as if he had slept in his

shirt, which, as a matter of fact, he often did. The only thing needed to make him look thoroughly disreputable was a few days' growth of beard. But this Nature denied him. According to George Devol, who was his partner for many years, "his face was as smooth as a woman's, and never had a particle of hair on it." Devol continued:

"Canada Bill was a character one might travel the length and breadth of the land and never find his match, or run across his equal. Imagine a medium-sized, chicken-headed, tow-haired sort of man with mild blue eyes, and a mouth nearly from ear to ear, who walked with a shuffling, half-apologetic sort of gait, and who, when his countenance was in repose, resembled an idiot. For hours he would sit in his chair, twisting his hair in little ringlets. Then I used to say, 'Bill is studying up some new devilment.' . . . Canada was a slick one. He had a squeaking, boyish voice, and awkward, gawky manners, and a way of asking fool questions and putting on a good-natured sort of grin, that led everybody to believe that he was the rankest kind of a sucker—the greatest sort of a country jake. Woe to the man who picked him up, though. Canada was, under all his hypocritical appearance, a regular card shark, and could turn Monte with the best of them. . . . Many are the suckers we roped in, and many the large rolls of bills we corralled. . . . Bill never weighed over 130 pounds, and was always complaining of pains in his head." ¹⁷

It was never necessary for Canada Bill to disguise himself in order to make the proper contacts with suckers whom he had chosen for the kill, but he did so anyway at every opportunity, for he had the small boy's love of make-believe. His favorite

¹⁷ *Forty Years a Gambler on the Mississippi*, by George Devol; 1926 edition; pages 185–86.

impersonation was that of an uncouth hog-drover, and when thus made up he must have been a fearful spectacle. Mason Long, one of the many reformed gamblers who flourished on the lecture platform after the Civil War, capped for a Monte hangout which Canada Bill operated at Utica, N.Y., during the harness races there in 1876, and described the sharper, in the guise of a hog-drover, as "a rustic looking creature . . . munching a huge piece of pie . . . a large man dressed in coarse clothes, with a sunburned countenance, a nose highly illuminated by the joint action of whisky and heat, and an expression of indescribable greenness and freshness about him."¹⁸ Incidentally, Canada Bill's stay in Utica netted several thousand dollars in cash and a half-bushel of watches, most of which he sold back to the men who had lost them.

Canada Bill made a great deal of money in the thirty or forty years in which he was active as a Monte thrower, but he was nearly always broke, for he was cursed by a veritable passion for gambling; he would play any game proposed and bet on any proposition, and he seldom won except at his own specialty, at which he never lost. "He loved gambling for its own sake," said George Devol, "just as the moralists love virtue for its own sake. No man that I ever came in contact with ever struck me as being so fond of gambling. I have seen him give parties two points in Casino and Seven-Up, and they would play marked cards on him . . . he was a fool at short cards. I have known men who knew this to travel all over the country after Bill, trying to induce him to play cards with them. He would do it, and that is what kept him poor. . . ." In Canada Bill's inordinate love of gambling and his willingness to play any game regardless of the odds against him, originated a story which has become the most popular of all gambling anecdotes.

¹⁸ *Mason Long, the Converted Gambler*, Written by Himself; Cincinnati, 1884; pages 118-21.

Compelled to spend the night in a small Louisiana town, Canada Bill finally found a Faro game in the back room of a barber-shop and began to play. His partner saw at once that the dealer was using a two-card box, and urged Canada Bill to quit.

"The game's crooked," he declared.

"I know it," Bill replied, "but it's the only one in town!"

Canada Bill worked the railroads after the Civil War had virtually stopped traffic on the Mississippi and driven the sharpers off the river, and found suckers so plentiful that he offered to pay one of the Southern systems \$25,000 a year for the right to operate Monte and confidence games on its lines without molestation, promising to victimize only preachers. The offer was refused. During the 1870's Canada Bill made a grand tour of the race tracks, and with Three-Card Monte and other swindles made so much money that he could have retired a dozen times—if he had kept away from Faro and short cards. He died a pauper at Reading, Pa., about 1880, and was buried by the Mayor of that city, who advanced money for the funeral expenses. He was afterward repaid by a group of Chicago gamblers. The story goes that when the body of Canada Bill was being lowered into the grave one of the gamblers present offered to bet \$1,000 to \$500 that Bill was not in the box. "Not with me," was the reply. "I've known Bill to squeeze through tighter holes than that!" Mason Long, who described Canada Bill as "the most notorious and successful thief who ever operated in this country," declared that the gambler had drunk himself to death, but George Devol indignantly denied this version of Canada Bill's death. "He did not drink whisky at all," Devol wrote. "His great drink was Christian cider, and it was very seldom I could get him to drink wine."

For all of his dangerous way of life, Canada Bill was an ar-rant physical coward—"he would not fight a woman if she said

boo." But there was never any need for him to fight as long as he traveled with Devol; the latter was fully competent to attend to that phase of the business. In his autobiography Devol boasted that he had "fought more rough and tumble fights than any man in America," and described himself as "the most daring gambler in the world." So far as gambling was concerned he may have taken in a little too much territory, although few sharpers of his time were more successful. As a Monte thrower he was second only to Canada Bill, and the pair formed a combination calculated to make the sucker clutch his wallet and scream in terror. In addition to his gifts in this field, Devol was an adept at dice and short cards, especially when it came to ringing in cold decks and "laying the bottom stock." His *bête noire* was Faro; he was always scolding Canada Bill for losing his money at Poker, Casino and Seven-Up, and at the same time was himself succumbing to the fascinations of the tiger. Devol was a professional gambler for almost forty years—he began about 1844 at the age of fifteen, a few years after he had run away from his home at Marietta, O., and retired in the early eighties—and in that time at least \$2,000,000 passed through his hands, most of it going to enrich crooked Faro dealers. "It is said of me," he wrote in 1886, "that I have won more money than any sporting man in this country. I will say that I hadn't sense enough to keep it; but if I had never seen a Faro bank, I would be a wealthy man today."

As a rough and tumble fighter Devol was in truth one of the mighty men of the Mississippi. He had scores of fights, but he was never beaten, although for some twenty years the sports of New Orleans, St. Louis and other river towns tried to find a man who could take his measure; it is doubtful if even the bullies of the flatboats could have made him cry "enough." Devol was a good man with his fists, but his most formidable weapon, with which he won most of his fights, was his head;

he butted his opponents into submission with his massive, dome-shaped cranium, backed by the weight of his powerful two-hundred-pound body. "He was a terrible rough and tumble fighter," said a writer in the Cincinnati *Enquirer*, "and many a tough citizen have I seen him do up. George was a great 'butter.' He could use his head with terrible effect. He can kill any man living, white or black, by butting him. Although over fifty years of age, I don't believe there is a man living who can whip him. New Orleans sporting men will go broke on that."¹⁹

Devol's most memorable feat as a butter was performed in 1867, when he engaged in a friendly butting match with Billy Carroll, one of the attractions of Robinson's Circus, who was billed as "The Great Butter" and "The Man with the Hard Head." Carroll's act consisted in smashing barrels and heavy doors with his head, and in butting all comers. He had never been knocked off his feet until he met Devol. The gambler and the circus star came together just once in New Orleans, and when Carroll recovered consciousness he said, "I have found my papa at last!" According to doctors who examined Devol when he was working the steamboats, his skull above the forehead was more than an inch thick. "It must be pretty thick," wrote the gambler, "for I have been struck some terrible blows on my head with iron dray-pins, pokers, clubs, stone-coal and bowlders. . . . I never have my hair clipped short, for if I did, I would be ashamed to take my hat off, as the lines on my old scalp look about like the railroad map of the state in which I was born."

A great many of Devol's fights were forced upon him by ambitious and optimistic young squirts eager to gain renown by defeating the famous butter, but all any of them ever got out of such an encounter was a headache. The gambler never

¹⁹ Quoted in Devol's autobiography, 1926 edition, pages 287-88.



Billy Carroll... billed as "The Great Butter"

dodged a fight when he was opposed by no more than two men, but when his enemies attempted to overwhelm him by force of numbers he had sense enough to run. For several years he was hunted up and down the river by a gang of ruffians known as the Arkansas Killers, who dominated the country around the Arkansas towns of Helena and Napoleon. Both of these communities were noted for the brawling proclivities of their inhabitants, and during the 1850's were the toughest settlements on the Mississippi, "where it was not safe for any man to do the bluff act, for they would kill him just to see him kick." As a matter of fact, Napoleon's reputation was not built up in that decade alone; it was notorious as a tough town in the days of the flatboats, and appears to have been the birth-place of one of America's classic stories of fighting. Said Thomas Bangs Thorpe in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* for December, 1855:

"The story is familiar of the man who took passage in a flatboat from Pittsburg bound for New Orleans. He passed many dreary, listless days on his way down the Ohio and Mississippi, and seemed to be desponding for want of excitement. . . . In course of time the raft upon which he was a passenger put in to Napoleon, in the state of Arkansas, 'for groceries.' At the moment there was a general fight extending all along the 'front of the town,' which at that time consisted of a single house. The unhappy passenger, after fidgeting about, and jerking his feet up and down, as if he were walking on hot bricks, turned to a used-up spectator and observed:

"'Stranger, is this a free fight?'

"The reply was prompt and to the point:

"'It ar'; and if you wish to go in, don't stand on ceremony!'

"The wayfarer did go in, and in less time than we can relate the circumstance he was literally 'chawed up.' Groping his way down to the flat, his hair gone, his eye closed, his lips swollen, and his face generally 'mapped out,' he sat himself down on a chicken coop and soliloquized thus:

"'So this is Na-po-le-on, is it?—upon my word it's a lively place, and the only one at which I've had any fun since I left home.'"

The Arkansas Killers were determined to catch Devol and "do him up," a euphemism, current in those days, for gouging out his eyes, pulling his ears off, and stamping his face into an unrecognizable mass. But the gambler always managed to keep away from them, although he had several narrow escapes. Once when he was throwing Monte, disguised as a countryman, on the steamer *Fairchild*, twenty-five of the Killers came aboard at Napoleon. Instead of hiding, the gambler, confident that they could not penetrate his disguise, opened up his game and cleaned out the whole twenty-five, taking their money, watches and other valuables. For a while the Killers made no complaint, although they realized that they had been trimmed by a professional sharper, but after a few drinks at the bar one of them said:

"Let's kill that damned gambler who got our money!"

They scattered to their staterooms to get their guns, and Devol hastily left the Social Hall. "Well," he wrote, "they hunted the boat from stem to stern—even took lights and went down into the hold—and finally gave up the chase, as one man said I had jumped overboard." While the search was in progress Devol was hiding under the pilot house. He gave the pilot \$100 in gold, "as I had both pockets filled with gold and watches," and the pilot promised that at the first point of land he would run the steamboat close inshore so Devol could jump.

Presently the pilot told him to get ready, and the gambler slipped from his hiding place and climbed to the top of the wheel-house, where he waited until the boat came close to shore. "Away I went," he wrote, "but it was farther than I expected, so I went down about thirty feet into the river, and stuck in the soft mud clear up to my waist. Some parties who were standing on the stern of the boat saw me, and gave the alarm, when the 'killers' all rushed back, and commenced firing at me, and the bullets went splattering all around me. The pilot threw her into the bend as quick as he could, and then let on she took a sheer on him, and nearly went to the other side." Devol was pulled out of the mud at the end of a long pole by some Negroes, and waited on the bank for another boat to come along. "I was always very stubborn," he said, "about giving up money if anyone wanted to compel me to do it."

On another occasion Devol was compelled to get off a steamboat at Helena, "as things had gotten a little too warm for me on the boat." Hearing that he was in town, and knowing that he would catch the next boat out, a dozen of the Killers assembled at the landing. There they found several gamblers, and thinking Devol was among them, beat them unmercifully. Meanwhile Devol was in a crowd of townspeople watching the fight. As the crew of the steamboat got ready to pull in the gangplank, Devol charged the Killers, butted his way through their demoralized ranks, and rushed safely aboard the boat.

6

Although the sure-thing artists were vastly in the majority, there were a few gamblers on the Mississippi in those days—notably John Powell, Dick Hargraves, Major George M. White, and Napoleon Bonaparte White, better known as Poley—who



From an old print

THE EXPOSURE OF "CHARLEY BLACK EYES"



From an old print

"CANADA BILL" TRIMMING A SUCKER AT THREE-CARD MONTE

were notorious among the sharpers as "square players;" they depended upon luck and skill rather than trickery and dishonesty. And it is perhaps significant that most of them appear to have died in poverty, while hundreds of sharpers who never drew an honest breath amassed fortunes and retired to enjoy the rich rewards of a misspent life. The career of John Powell, as honest a gambler as ever dealt a Poker hand, provides a case in point. A Missourian who maintained a home in New Orleans during the period of his activity on the Mississippi, Powell was a fine figure of a man—tall, handsome, distinguished, well-educated, and possessing a personality and charm which won him the friendship of such men as Stephen A. Douglas and Andrew Jackson. He is said to have spent considerable time at Jackson's home, near Nashville, during the old hero's last years. Powell himself had been destined for a political career, but as a young man had declined a nomination for Congress in Missouri to become a professional gambler. He was active on the Mississippi for some fifteen years, and during most of that time was recognized as the best Poker player on the river—a daring plunger always willing to back his judgment to the limit.

His success was extraordinary. On his fiftieth birthday, in 1858, he reckoned that he had accumulated, entirely through gambling, a fortune of approximately half a million dollars. Among other properties, he owned a theater and several houses in New Orleans, a plantation and many horses and slaves in Tennessee, and valuable real estate in St. Louis. His friends urged him to retire, but he refused, and within a few months after this decision his career as a gambler, so far as success was concerned, had ended with a triumph and a tragedy. In the late summer of 1858 he won \$50,000 in a three-day Poker session on the steamer *Atlantic*, during which the four players ran up a bar bill of \$791.50. A month or two later Powell got into a

Poker game with a young English traveler, and won \$8,000 and all of the young man's luggage. The Englishman didn't appear to be particularly disheartened, but when he came into the dining-saloon next morning he shook hands ceremoniously with all of the passengers and then shot himself. Badly shaken by the suicide, Powell sent the money and baggage he had won to the Englishman's family, and was seen no more on the Mississippi for a year. When he returned to the river he was both inept and unlucky, and within another year had lost everything he owned. Shabby and desperate, he hung around the New Orleans gambling houses until a year or so after the beginning of the Civil War. Then he went to Seattle, where he died in 1870.

The career of Napoleon Bonaparte White, who followed the river with considerable success from about 1845 to the Civil War, had an even more tragic ending than did that of John Powell. Poley's misfortunes began during the early years of the carpet-bag regime in Louisiana, when he begat two sons and opened a gambling house on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans. His partner, Sam Williams, made a fortune from the venture, but Poley's share of the profits was spent trying to save his sons, who seem to have been scalawags almost from birth, from the consequences of their crimes. One of the boys, Benny, died of alcoholism in jail; and in the fall of 1889 Poley learned that the other, Jimmy, had killed two men in California and was a fugitive. On the day he received this distressing information, Poley was also notified that the New Orleans police intended to enforce a new anti-gambling ordinance. Broke and desperate, Poley borrowed five dollars, bought a revolver and some poison, told his friends good-bye, and then went home and killed himself.

Both Dick Hargraves and Major George M. White appear to have saved at least a part of their winnings, and were in

comfortable circumstances when they died. Major White was a professional gambler for sixty-two years; he played his first game in New Orleans in 1825, and his last in San Francisco in 1887, thirteen years before his death in 1900 at the age of ninety-five. His most prosperous year on the Mississippi was 1857, when he made a clear profit of \$30,000, which in those days was an enormous income for such a period. For several years Major White is said to have been paid \$400 a week for dealing Faro in New Orleans, and it seems reasonable to assume that while thus engaged his squareness was in abeyance, for as has been pointed out, no Faro artist was ever paid that much money simply for pulling cards out of a box.

Hargraves, a slim, handsome Englishman who was almost as popular as John Powell, won renown on the river as a duelist and an adventurer as well as a gambler. He came to the United States as a boy of sixteen about 1840, worked as a bartender in New Orleans for a few years, and became a professional gambler about 1844, after he had won \$30,000 in a Poker game with a rich Louisiana sugar-planter. If legend be true, or even half true, Hargraves was the most successful of all river gamblers—he is said to have won \$2,000,000 at the card table in less than twelve years' activity on the steamboats. Hargraves was a notorious lady-killer and was involved in many amours, several of which resulted in duels with lovers and husbands whom he had supplanted. The most serious of these affairs occurred in the early 1850's, when he became infatuated with the wife of a New Orleans banker, and killed the latter in a meeting under The Oaks, the city's famous dueling ground. A year or so later he met the wife's brother, who had sworn to kill him on sight, in a gambling house at Natchez-under-the-Hill. Hargraves killed the brother after a desperate fight with knives, but when he returned to New Orleans his mistress stabbed him and then committed suicide. When Hargraves re-

covered from his wounds he married a girl whom he had rescued from a fire in Mobile, but soon tired of wedded bliss and joined a filibustering expedition to Cuba. At the outbreak of the Civil War his military experience won him a commission as Major in the Union Army. When the War ended he went to Denver, where he died of tuberculosis sometime in the early 1880's.

7

Four of the many well-known gamblers who left the river for the river's good when the Vigilantes went on the warpath at Vicksburg—Isaiah Rynders, Charles Legate, Colonel J. J. Bryant, and Charles Cora—were destined to achieve fame of a sort in other fields. Rynders went to New York, where he called himself Captain, eschewed gambling, and went into politics as a shoulder-hitter and ward heeler for Tammany Hall. The adeptness with which he discouraged anti-Tammany voters with a blackjack earned him the posts of leader of the famous Five Points gang and Democratic boss of the Sixth Ward; and after that he was successively a saloon-keeper, founder of the notorious Empire Club, member of the Tammany Central Committee, and United States Marshal. He was a candidate for the Legislature in 1850, but was defeated; during the campaign Philip Hone, in his diary, referred to Rynders as "a notorious bandit." One of Rynders' claims to fame is that he was the principal instigator of the Astor Place riots in 1849, when twenty-three persons were killed and more than 125 injured. Ostensibly this disturbance grew out of the professional jealousies of the American actor Edwin Forrest and the English actor William C. Macready; actually it was the result of the manipulation, by Rynders and other politicians, of the Irish element which has always been powerful in New York.

Legate was a Canadian by birth, a handsome "black-muzzled

villain," sometimes called Charley Black Eyes. He was known up and down the Mississippi, and in Vicksburg and Natchez-under-the-Hill, not only as an expert playing sharper, but also as an "itemer" of rare talent. He left Vicksburg at the first sign of trouble, and was far up the river, traveling as Charles L. Montford of New Orleans, when the five gamblers were hanged in the barbecue grove. For the next few years Charley Black Eyes lived in St. Louis, posing as a banker and speculator, moving in the best sporting society, and carefully avoiding all who had known him on the lower Mississippi. Meanwhile he was developing latent gifts as a forger and an all-around swindler, and soon was as expert at these trades as at card playing and "iteming." About 1840, disguised variously as a banker, a planter and a merchant, Charley Black Eyes began to appear on the steamboats and in the larger river towns, forging checks and swindling firms and individuals, and gradually returning to his first love, gambling. Within a few years he was in bad odor with the police of almost every town south of St. Louis, and particularly of New Orleans, where a reward of \$2,000 had been offered for his arrest. To escape the hue and cry, Legate went to New York, which was a mistake, for when he swindled a New York merchant out of \$50,000 his victim put on his trail George S. McWatters, a famous private detective of the period, who was afterward a shining ornament of the New York police force and the Secret Service. No criminal ever escaped Officer McWatters; he practically admitted as much in his autobiography.²⁰

The defrauded merchant gave the detective a good description of Legate, and recalled that the tip of the swindler's left little finger was missing—it had been hacked off in a brawl at

²⁰ *Knots Untied, or, Ways and By-Ways in the Hidden Life of American Detectives*, by Officer George S. McWatters; Hartford, 1871. Republished in 1883, with a few changes and additions, under the title of *Detectives of Europe and America, or Life in the Secret Service*.

Natchez-under-the-Hill. Since McWatters couldn't find Legate in New York, he cleverly deduced that Charley Black Eyes had returned to his old stamping ground on the Mississippi, and himself went to St. Louis. There he learned that Legate had left for New Orleans several months before, so he embarked on the steamer *Continental* for the passage down the river. Luck was with McWatters, as it frequently was, for when the *Continental* stopped to "wood up" at Napoleon, Ark., who should come aboard but Legate! Officer McWatters didn't recognize Charley Black Eyes, for the sharper called himself Colonel Jacobs, posed as "a well-to-do planter of middle age," and had an apparently complete left little finger, upon which he wore a heavy seal ring. Nevertheless, the detective felt at once that Colonel Jacobs was not what he pretended to be, and suspicion became certainty that evening when gambling began in the Social Hall. To the observant eye of McWatters it was obvious that Colonel Jacobs was a sharper, and that he was in cahoots with another passenger, "large and quite comely," and disguised as "a Stranger from the North," who had also joined the boat's company at Napoleon. Colonel Jacobs played a few stiff hands of Poker with the Stranger, and the latter was so inept that when the Colonel decided to quit there was a great clamor among the passengers as to who should take his place. A four-handed game was organized, and immediately the Stranger began winning heavily—for the very good reason that Colonel Jacobs had posted himself in an advantageous position and was iteming the hands of the opposing players.

Presently the Stranger was accused of cheating, a few minutes later Charley Black Eyes was detected iteming, and a cry arose that "That black-muzzled wretch is worse than the big one!" The Stranger slipped away, but Colonel Jacobs was set upon by the passengers and severely beaten. He was carried to his stateroom, where McWatters noticed that his left little fin-

ger and seal ring were gone. Both were found at the scene of the fracas. "I took charge of the finger, which was made of hardened wax, as my trophy," wrote McWatters, "and someone, I knew not who, took the ring." McWatters took Legate to a private hospital when the *Continental* reached New Orleans, and the gambler avoided prosecution by returning \$50,000 to the New Yorker whom he had swindled and \$25,000 to the New Orleans firm which had offered the reward for his arrest, and paying McWatters' fee and expenses. There is no record that Legate again operated on the river; when he left the hospital he said he intended to abandon gambling and raise "niggers and cotton."

Colonel J. J. Bryant, for many years the best known gambler on the Mississippi, who acquired his military title by the easy method of usurpation, attempted to follow Isaiah Rynders' example and carve out a new career in politics, but his success was negligible, although he gained a certain distinction as the first Democratic candidate for Sheriff of San Francisco. A native of Lynchburg, Va., the Colonel's first venture into public life was at the age of eighteen, when he ran away from home and joined a traveling circus, in which he performed acceptably for several years as a sword swallower and a slack wire artist. In his early twenties he married and settled in Jackson, Miss., opening a grocery store and later a hotel. Neither prospered, and the Colonel tried his hand at dealing in Negroes, and after that at a dozen other businesses. In all of these commercial undertakings Colonel Bryant had partners who were invariably left holding the bag, while the Colonel, who, as one of his biographers said, "had more assurance than twenty men ought to be entitled to," gracefully withdrew with whatever profits might have accrued to the firm.

Throughout his business career Colonel Bryant spent at least as much time at the card table as in attending to his legitimate

affairs, and during the middle 1820's he abandoned all pretense, became an avowed professional gambler, and enjoyed several prosperous years on the steamboats and in the river towns. He specialized in Brag, Poker, All-Fours and Old Sledge, although he often financed and roped for Faro banks in New Orleans, Mobile and other cities, and sometimes dealt a game. He was never a first-rate Faro artist, but few could equal him at short cards, even when the game was honestly played. About 1832 Colonel Bryant established himself at Vicksburg, and in less than a year was the most important gambler in the town, and the financial backer of several Roulette houses and six or eight Faro banks, into which he roped prospects whom he was unable to trim at short cards. A few of his enterprises were at the Landing, but most of them were on the Hill, where the Colonel himself made his headquarters. They were frequented by some of Vicksburg's leading citizens, prime suckers who also participated in Bryant's Brag and Poker games and admired him tremendously for his heavy betting and lavish entertainment. For the Colonel "understood the advantages of display, and spent his money freely with those who were rich, more especially when he had designs on their pockets." He was never caught cheating, and it is doubtful if any other gambler of his time had more influential friends. Apparently he had no connection with the Clan of the Mystic Confederacy.

In all probability Colonel Bryant would not have been molested had he remained in Vicksburg, but he didn't dare put friendship to such a test, and was one of the first to leave when the gamblers were ordered out of the town. During the next few years the Colonel traveled in Alabama and Louisiana, winning a great deal of money at short cards and losing most of it at Faro and *Monte*, which was just beginning to be popular in that part of the country. In 1839, at Huntsville, Ala., the Colonel had a memorable short card session with Allen Jones, a

prosperous saddler and a Poker player of considerable local renown. Bryant let Jones play along until he had pledged his business and every cent he owned, and then dealt the saddler four kings and himself four aces. Jones was so impressed by the ease with which he had been trimmed that he implored the Colonel to teach him the tricks of the trade, the upshot being that the two men became partners. For the next ten years they were inseparable companions living on a common purse. They spent the summers at the fashionable watering-places of the South, and the winters at New Orleans and Mobile, and at Jackson, Miss., where they operated a Faro bank and Poker house during the sessions of the Mississippi Legislature.

Colonel Bryant dissolved the partnership in the fall of 1849 and went to San Francisco, where within a few weeks he won \$75,000 playing *Monte*. He sent a third of this fortune to his wife in Mississippi, and with the remainder bought a hotel called the Ward House, which he renamed the Bryant House. Under the Colonel's management the Bryant House was more a gambling-joint than a hotel, but it produced a large revenue, which the Colonel spent freely to further his political ambitions. When he was nominated for Sheriff of San Francisco in 1850 the Bryant House was literally covered with flags and bunting, free drinks were served at the bar to all comers, and the Colonel made a speech from the balcony every few hours. On election day the Bryant forces paraded Portsmouth Square with signs and banners, companies of gaudily-clad horsemen, and bands of music in carriages. But the independent candidate, Colonel Jack Hayes, was an even better showman than Colonel Bryant. Unable to equal the latter's display, he appeared in the Square alone, astride a magnificent black stallion, and wearing the uniform in which he had won fame during the War with Mexico. The voters promptly abandoned Bryant's circus for the stern warrior, and elected Colonel Hayes by

a large majority.

The embittered Colonel Bryant sold his hotel soon after the collapse of his political career, and was preparing to seek greener pastures when he was offered a third interest in one of the Faro banks at El Dorado, early San Francisco's most celebrated gambling house. He was supposed to rope for the game and give it the benefit of his effulgent presence. In three months the Colonel's share of the profits was large enough for him to send his wife \$30,000—all told, during his few years' stay in California, he provided for his family to the extent of \$110,000, and still was able to maintain himself in an extremely extravagant style of living. He quit El Dorado when the game entered upon a losing streak, and confined himself to short card trickery in San Francisco and various mining camps. About 1854 he suddenly left California, his departure probably being hastened by the arrival in San Francisco of Charles Cora, one of his cronies of the old days at Vicksburg, to whom he owed \$35,000. The Colonel was next heard of in New Orleans, where he was more or less concerned in the operation of several gambling houses.

Cora, a foundling reared by the keeper of a brothel at Natchez-under-the-Hill, was a professional gambler at sixteen, and before he was forty had achieved a permanent place in California history as one of the miscreants hanged by the San Francisco Vigilance Committee of 1856. In gambling annals he deserves renown as one of the few sharpers who could beat the other man's game. Like all professional cheats of his time, Cora was a Faro addict, and when he wasn't operating his own bank he was bucking the tiger from the other side of the layout. But unlike his fellows, he was a consistent winner against some of the most expert tricksters who ever practiced their mysterious arts in America; he seemed to possess the uncanny knack of being able to guess whether the Faro artist had prepared the

cards to win or lose, and made his bets accordingly. His entire career, until it ended abruptly at the end of a rope, was an almost continuous run of good luck. In one period of about six months he performed the well-nigh incredible feat of winning \$85,000 from Faro banks at New Orleans, Vicksburg and Natchez-under-the-Hill, while his total gains from his comrades in skulduggery are said to have approximated \$300,000.

By the time he was eighteen, in 1834, Cora had a stake of \$10,000, which he had won at Faro in Natchez and New Orleans. Early in 1835 he went to Vicksburg, and within two months had devastated half a dozen Faro banks, most of them controlled by that courtly scalawag Colonel Bryant, and thereby added \$40,000 to his bankroll. Greatly perturbed by the spectacle of an eighteen-year-old boy on the loose in Vicksburg with \$50,000 in his pockets, Colonel Bryant evolved a somewhat complicated scheme intended to reduce Cora to his proper status. He began by paying considerable attention to the young gambler, entertaining him at dinner and publicly congratulating him on his victory over Faro banks. Presently he broached the subject of a loan, and Cora, flattered at being noticed by such a famous personage as the Colonel, readily parted with \$10,000, with which one of Bryant's associates opened a Faro game. The Colonel then roped Cora in to play against his own money, and the boy won the \$10,000 in a few deals. Next day the Colonel borrowed another \$10,000 and Cora won that also, as well as \$15,000 which the Colonel talked him out of a week later. Colonel Bryant then owed Cora \$35,000, which he had no intention of paying, as one of the guiding principles of his life was never to discharge a debt if it could be avoided. To rid himself of the importunate Cora, who had at last realized what the Colonel was trying to do, Bryant employed a noted ruffian to run him out of town. Properly frightened, the boy went to Natchez-under-the-Hill, and was there when the cru-

sade against the gamblers began. He fled with the rest of the Natchez sharpers.

After a few years in New Orleans and Mobile, and a successful whirl at gambling on the steamboats, Cora turned his steps toward the East, and finally landed in Baltimore, where he seduced Arabella Ryan, daughter of a Baltimore clergyman, who thereafter called herself Belle Cora. Together they went to San Francisco, and while Cora made life miserable for both the suckers and the Faro dealers, she quickly amassed a comfortable fortune by operating a brothel on Pike Street, now Waverly Place. On November 18, 1855, Cora shot and killed General W. H. Richardson, United States Marshal for the Northern District of California, during a quarrel which had begun three days previously, when General Richardson objected to Belle Cora's presence at the American Theater. Cora was arrested and tried for murder, but the jury disagreed after deliberating forty-one hours. He was still in jail, awaiting a new trial, when the Vigilantes gained control of San Francisco in May, 1856, and was executed by the Vigilance Committee on May 20. An hour before he was hanged he and Belle Cora were married, and after his death she remained in her room for a month. When she emerged she sold her brothel and devoted herself to good works, becoming widely known for her gifts to charity. She died in comparative poverty on February 17, 1862.

8

There was a great influx of river gamblers into New Orleans when Federal and Confederate gunboats began operating on the Mississippi and the navigation of passenger steamboats virtually ceased. In a great burst of patriotic enthusiasm the gamblers organized a military company, officially called the Wilson Rangers but known among the sharpers themselves as the

Blackleg Cavalry, which was one of the best-equipped units, and the most nearly useless, in the Confederate Army. In a glowing account of their fine horses and handsome uniforms the New Orleans *True Delta* optimistically judged the Rangers "to be a valuable addition to our army of gulf coast defense," but according to George Devol, who was a member of the company, the gamblers were strictly peace-time soldiers. They rode out to drill every day, but instead of maneuvering under the hot sun they devoted the time to sitting under shade trees and skinning one another at Poker and Seven-Up. The Rangers' first and only experience in actual warfare came in April, 1862, when Farragut's fleet began to bombard Forts Jackson and St. Philip, the most important of New Orleans' defenses. The gamblers' company was sent down the river to harry the Yankee land forces under General Benjamin F. Butler, and the townspeople cheered the Rangers as they rode through the streets, but as Devol said, "there was but little cheer in that fine body of gamblers." Some six miles below the city a Yankee ship fired at them, and the doughty sharpers retreated at full speed. When they reached New Orleans they cut the brass buttons off their uniforms, buried their sabers, and forthwith discharged themselves from the Army. "We had enough of military glory," wrote Devol, "and were tired of war."

General Butler prohibited all gambling after the Yankee Army had taken possession of New Orleans on May 1, 1862, but a few weeks later he notified the sharpers that they might open houses if they would pay a stiff license fee and take his brother, A. J. Butler, in as full partner. A dozen gamblers accepted this arrangement, but several who attempted to operate without paying tribute to the Butlers, among them Price McGrath, were imprisoned. During most of the Butler regime George Devol ran the old Oakland race track, giving the suckers fixed races to bet on and skinning them with Faro and

Monte games in the grandstand. This was one of the most prosperous periods of Devol's career, but it came to an end when he began trimming Yankee officers and Army paymasters. Butler warned him to stop, but he persisted, and Butler put him in jail and confiscated all the horses at the race track, which were worth about \$50,000. A little later the General's brother took the animals across Lake Pontchartrain and sold them to the Confederate Army. When Devol was released he resumed operations in New Orleans, but afterward went to Mobile, where he ran two gambling houses until the end of the War. The New Orleans gamblers ceased their payments to the Butler brothers when the General was transferred in December, 1862, and the gambling houses were not molested until early in 1864, when they were again closed by order of General A. Hurlburt. They remained closed until the carpet-baggers took over the civil government of Louisiana.

9

At the conclusion of the Civil War hundreds of sharpers attempted to revive the good old days on the Mississippi, but they found that conditions had undergone a radical change. Comparatively few steamboats were making regular trips, travel was light and the travelers poor and suspicious, and the rich slave-owner and cotton planter, who had been the mainstay of river gambling, had vanished altogether. Moreover, the professional gambler was no longer regarded with amused tolerance by the officers of the steamers; instead, he was looked upon and treated as an ordinary crook. States on both sides of the Mississippi began to pass laws calculated to harass and suppress the sharper, and more often than not he was turned over to the authorities ashore and clapped into jail. By the middle 1870's river gambling had declined to such an extent that a sharper on

a steamboat was a rarity instead of a commonplace. Most of the old-time river gamblers drifted into the big cities or followed the post-war wave of immigration into the cow and mining towns of the Western frontier, while many took to the railroads. For a few years the trains of the South and Southwest were almost as crowded with gamblers as the steamboats had been in the days of their greatest popularity. Railroad gambling, however, never reached really important proportions for several reasons. In the main the train-crews were extremely hard-boiled, while the rate of travel was so fast, and the average railroad journey so short, that the sharper had insufficient time to work up his games and bring his sucker to fever heat.

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